

DEFIANT HEARTS



W. HELMBURG

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DEFIANT HEARTS

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BY

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"My Hearts Darling," "Good Luck," "Her Only Brother,"
Etc., Etc.

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Defiant Hearts

DEFIANT. HEARTS.

CHAPTER I.

A THICK autumn mist lay upon the mountains ; it seemed to be held lovingly captive by the unnumbered tops of the oaks and beeches, and vanished in a delicate veil only when the forest receded to give place to the houses of the small town. The little North German capital stretched down into the open country, as neat and spotless as though just taken from a box of playthings by a childish hand. Built upon a hill and proudly dominating the town, stood the Castle with its square tower and massive wings. The spacious gardens which merged gradually into the forest sloped downwards to the castle square, about were built the dwellings of the court officials, the manor house of the domain, the royal mews, the little theatre, the court chapel and the hotel. Beyond this, the town proper began. Regular streets bordered by great chestnut trees led to the market square. At the upper end a few imposing villas still stood ; at the lower end the modest burgher homes predominated, gradually degenerating into mere hovels. From the regions of the court

one came to the business quarters. Here agriculture and cattle-raising were the chief pursuits, which gave an almost pastoral air to the central portion of the capital, and which were attractive neither to patent leather boots, nor to the sense of smell.

Above, "at the Castle," as the people proudly called the more beautiful portion of their native town, the contrast was all the greater. Nature had here been lavish with her gifts, and any one who had seen this show quarter of the little town on this misty autumn morning, with the mist-shrouded mountains on the one side and on the other the castle, above whose terraces waved the purple banners of the Virginia creeper, and whose white walls rose above the brilliant autumn foliage of the gardens, would have agreed with the good citizens of Breitenfels that their surroundings were most poetic. The almost unearthly quiet and solitude that reigned here contributed to this not a little. As though lost in dreams, the castle looked down upon the market-place. The most of the windows were closed; only on the forest side, toward the south, did the main building seem to be inhabited. There the old and widowed duchess led a lonely life in the company of two ladies-in-waiting, one elderly, the other young, a gouty, white-haired chamberlain, and various pugs and tenderly cherished parrots. The maids and lackeys needed no powder for their hair; age had whitened it. The head of the ducal coachman even shook a little, and her Serene Highness's four horses—that drew the huge calèche up the last steep slope to await the noble lady, who took her drive with

unfailing regularity,—seemed immortal. For many years had the Breitenfelsers known the big grays, and there was even a dark rumor about them, that once, in ages past, they had run away. But no one knew positively. It was too long ago.

A sentry, who was pacing to and fro before the wrought-iron gateway, was the only living creature in sight, unless one counted the head-forester's badger dogs, Lola and Maenne, who were racing about among the withered leaves of the chestnut trees. The silence was ghostly. Suddenly there broke upon the soft, moist air a human voice, a woman's voice, a clear, bell-like soprano.

“Oh, crimson glow of the sinking sun,”

came from the open window of the sitting-room of Medical Adviser May, the much loved but also much tormented physician in ordinary to her Serene Highness, without whose counsel the great lady could not live a day, and to whom, as she told every one who would listen, she owed her life not once, but a hundred times, and whom she considered superior to all others in his profession, however famous. The doctor's house stood opposite the castle, its windows blinking up at it reverentially. Her Highness often assured her “dear May” that it was so comforting to her to see the light of his lamp shining up at her at night, for she knew that a devoted friend was thinking of her and striving to prolong her life, which, although it was nothing more than a stubborn fight against the selfishness of her royal stepson, had nevertheless grown to be a precious habit.

At all events, the great lady did not want to die and she followed with touching docility the directions of her medical adviser. The doctor, expected to be ready at a moment's notice when summoned to the castle, could have no general practice. Besides, in the little town there were already four other physicians who scarcely earned their daily bread. As to the remuneration for attendance and daily consultations at the ducal court, it was not dazzlingly large; her Serene Highness paid about seven hundred and fifty dollars annually for herself and her entire household, but in addition to this her "dear May" had free lodging, so and so many cords of beech wood, and also several orders of the ducal house. But he was satisfied with this, since he knew well that he would have to wear out more than one pair of shoes to earn his salary as a plain practitioner. He valued home and fuel above income, and lived, honest and upright and happy, with his wife, who fully shared her husband's opinions.

The sons, one of whom was a lieutenant in a Prussian regiment of artillery and the other still a student, would, indeed, have preferred a larger outflow from the paternal coffers; but "a rascal gives more than he has," the doctor declared. "Remember, lads, you asked for nothing better, you chose your careers yourselves—I can't give you more than seven dollars and fifty cents a month; and you have the additional allowance from the Ruprecht endowment."

Aenne had rebelled the least against her father's modest circumstances. She regretted nothing, at

all events until now. She knew nothing different : she had been brought up in the good old-fashioned way, in accordance with the saying, which the doctor had constantly on his lips, "Women and stoves belong at home." Aenne was so full of youthful enthusiasm, so sound in body and mind, so contented over her little duties, so happy in her one gift,—a beautiful voice, which, however, imperfect instruction had done little to develop,—that she would not have changed place with any one, least of all with Antonie von Ribbeneck, her Serene Highness's youngest lady-in-waiting, who, tormented with ennui, would pay occasional visits at the Mays' in her hours of freedom. For the Mays had the right to appear at court in Breitenfels : their presence was requested by her Highness on every reception evening, and Aenne had to sing before the extraordinarily assorted circle in the ducal music-room.

She had been graciously invited to sing this evening also, and she was practising her songs, one in particular, which was to open the first musical event of the season.

It was about ten o'clock in the morning ; Mother May was in the kitchen, preparing the midday meal with the assistance of the maid, Caroline, a girl of sixteen ; the doctor was sitting in his study at his desk, writing. The duchess wanted new stoves in some of the rooms, as the old ones did not heat sufficiently, and his Highness, the reigning prince, had ignored the request of the chamberlain, Von Ellenberg, thinking, doubtless, that his noble stepmother might pay for the desired improvements out of her

own pocket. The dowager duchess, however, insisted upon her legal rights, which required the ruling prince to maintain her dower house in comfortable condition. She was so excited by her unnatural son's behavior that the doctor thought it best to interpose, and so drew a vivid picture of the danger of stoves that allowed coal gas to escape and thereby seriously endanger her Highness's health. If after this the ruling prince did not comply, he would prove himself a heartless stepson before the world.

In the sitting-room, opposite the doctor's study and separated from it only by a hall, the last notes of the song were just dying away. Aenne May rose from the piano and closed the lid somewhat noisily, startling Aunt Emilie from the slumber into which she had been lulled by the sweet tones.

"Gracious goodness! what a girl you are!" she cried, starting from her sofa; "it sounded like an earthquake!"

Aenne May's laugh and the sight of the frolicsome girl caused the old lady's annoyance to vanish, and she asked,—

"Where are you going, Goldenlocks? Why are you putting on your gloves?"

"I am going to the general rehearsal at the castle, auntie. Good-by. Settle down comfortably in your corner and go to sleep again—there'll be no one to disturb you."

She dropped a childish courtesy and vanished from the old lady's delighted eyes, to make her way shortly after across the castle square to the iron gates of the ducal park.

Aenne May had a slender, well-proportioned figure, fair hair, fragrant and wavy, that appeared as though it were lightly sprinkled with ashes; her coloring was delicate and her sparkling brown eyes looked frankly at every one,—trustful eyes that showed that they had never seen an ugly sight and had never shed tears of disappointment. Sometimes it seemed as though gold sparks were dancing in them, like the merry thoughts that were chasing each other in their owner's brain; and, indeed, there was no merrier girl in Breitenfels than Aenne May; her laughter could be heard everywhere, and her mother would often shake her head when she had indulged in some new prank and say, "Ah, you will not always laugh."

But her mother's foreboding had not yet come to pass, and the dainty nose always seemed to be sniffing the air as though in search of fresh laughing material for the mouth, from behind whose red lips the white teeth were so ready to peep forth.

In the mean time she had reached the gates without noticing that a pair of masculine eyes were following her from the window of the head-forester's house. But these glances could have no power over her; she did not look around but walked slowly on within the park, along a side-path that led to the south terrace and from thence to the castle court. She paused on the stone stairway and looked down upon the plain that lay before her, bathed in the pale autumn sunlight.

Then she walked on through the withered, rustling leaves, raising her feet as little as possible, as

school children do, and around the great fountain upon whose placid surface floated the yellow leaves of the encircling lindens.

The wheezy clock in the tower of the old castle chapel was striking the half-hour, and at the sound, Aenne May stopped; there was plenty of time; she still had half an hour. She turned, made her way through the rustling dead leaves to a pavilion at the west end of the terrace and peered in through the glass door. But in the same instant she drew her head back so quickly that her dark felt hat fell from her head, and, clutching it with both hands, she turned, making hasty flight. The door of the little octagonal building was thrown open and a young man in a linen coat spattered with paint stepped, or rather darted forward, crying,—

“This is really too delightful. Miss Aenne—you must give me a criticism! Come in and tell me what you think of the daub and whether the duchess and her suite of fair ladies could look at it without going into convulsions?”

She faced the speaker at once but she did not laugh; indeed, she looked a trifle pale; but she accepted the invitation without any show of resistance and led the way into the room, the door of which stood wide open and whose walls, between the windows, had been frescoed by a skillful amateur in the style of the Middle Ages.

“There, Aenne,” he cried with comical pride, pointing to the central figure, “there you are! You should feel flattered.”

“Really? Is that meant for me?”

"Yes! Can't you see it for yourself? There is your fair hair, your mischievous brown eyes——"

He stopped and looked at her with such honest admiration that she turned in confusion from him to the picture.

"So that is meant for me!" she repeated with forced gayety. "It's not the least bit like!"

"Not anywhere near as charming as the original, of course," he admitted, "but——"

"Not a bit like!" she interrupted. "I should never in my life have thought of dressing in such frightful taste—a green underskirt, and a crimson overskirt, oh, and a blue border and a blue girdle! Fie, Heinz, you've no idea of color!"

"It was the style in 1450," he said in self-defence.

"And that one over there, the court lady with the wreath on her head, that is—yes, that is really like her. Heinz!" she cried exultantly, "you have put your heart into painting Toni von Ribbeneck!"

"Put my what?" he asked, laughing.

She did not answer but looked with keen enjoyment at the cleverly-drawn figure; the hard, proud face with the colorless, pouting lips, the shoulders that were too broad, the angular waist, and the hair that fell in scant locks, crowned with a wreath of flowers. The young woman was represented with a guitar on her arm as she walked at the side of the Countess Breitenfels, an ancestress of the duchess.

"It is a sin and a shame, Heinz, that you didn't become a painter!" the girl exclaimed at last. "Start afresh, go to Munich, or some such place, and don't let such a gift be wasted."

"But you see, Aenne, I am cultivating this divine spark industriously here."

"You are only amusing yourself with these," she answered, pointing to the figures. "Seriously, Heinz, do you really feel happy in your present position?"

"Yes," he answered decidedly, but with a shadow on his handsome face.

"Yes?" she asked mockingly. "It must be an inspiring sensation to command a corps of twenty men in Breitenfels, to inspect the guard at her Highness's gates, and to announce to the duchess at noon, in full uniform, that all is well in her dominions and that her Highness may take her afternoon nap in safety."

"The jest doesn't apply, Aenne—it is duty," he explained. "I am a soldier, heart and soul—I wouldn't advise any one to doubt it—and, Aenne, do you know, I find this command immensely pleasant?" And he seated himself upon the table and looked with a speaking glance into her eyes and smiled.

He was, in his way, as fine a specimen of his kind as Aenne May was of hers, as fresh and young as she, and as poor as she, unfortunately, but less contented under his poverty, which fact, however, he admitted only to himself. And in the face of his pressing financial circumstances, he could scarcely be blamed for his discontent.

"Did you sleep well, Miss Quiz, and are you any the worse for your walk in the woods?" he asked after a pause.

She flushed scarlet.

"No," she answered evasively. "But please tell me, Heinz, how late is it? I must be in the red drawing-room for rehearsal at the stroke of eleven."

"There's plenty of time yet, Fräulein Aenne, a whole quarter of an hour. Won't you sit down on that stool there, and let me take a look at you—in the interest of that faulty likeness." And seizing his palette, he went on talking, without looking at her. "I never saw such a sunset as that was last night, Aenne,—the whole forest seemed to be on fire. If one were to paint it as it was, there would be such a jumble of brilliant colors on the canvas that every one would exclaim, 'Impossible! Quite impossible! There is nothing in nature like that!' And we, there in the red light in the clearing—you should have seen your face, Aenne, it was simply ravishing; and then the song, you wouldn't sing it at first." And he began to sing, beating time with his mahlstick,—

"Oh, crimson glow of the sinking sun,
How magic thy spell upon hill and dale;
How thou changest to roseate ecstasy
The face of my loved one, erstwhile so pale!"

"These words seemed to come into my head of themselves, and you must admit they're not so bad—for a lieutenant, rather good, in fact! And then the air—your favorite air—Ah, Aenne, it was one of the moments in one's life that one never forgets! And then how the gray twilight came creeping on

and dark shadows sprang up in the woodland path—Aenne, do you know——” he cried rapturously.

“I know nothing,” the girl broke in, and as he turned in surprise at her tone, he saw that she had flushed suddenly and that there was a pained, intense look on her face.

“Why, Aenne, are you angry with me? Me, your old friend?” And, as she remained silent, he went on,—

“Come, Aenne, how long have we known each other? Since we were children, almost ten years ago, when I studied at the gymnasium here. Is it not enough if we have ceremoniously addressed each other as ‘you’ since our meeting three months ago? Yesterday evening, though—I think—I called you ‘thou.’ Ah, Aenne, cannot you forgive me? Why should we—but Aenne—what is the matter with you?”

“I must go,” she said, rising slowly, pale to the lips.

“Good-bye, then, Aenne, until this evening; and don’t you let any one but me get you your supper—I warn you! And Aenne, give me your hand, don’t be angry because of yesterday!”

She held out her right hand with a smile, but she could not keep back two great tears. This was something so unusual, something so in contradiction to her laughing mouth that he stared at her dumbly, and as she passed quickly through his open door and under the leafless chestnuts across the lonely terrace, he stood motionless and gazed after her, even long after she had disappeared. Then he passed his hand

across his forehead, looked absently at the frescoing, and still absorbed in his thoughts, seated himself in the chair from which the young girl had just risen.

Aenne May had cried! It seemed to him that with these tears from her eyes the scales had fallen from his own; but how could he think of such a thing—Aenne May and he! He, the poorest lieutenant in the whole German army, who through favor had been stationed here, that he might better his finances by getting away for a while from the expensive garrison life; here, where he could live for nothing, almost, and receive a commanding officer's pay into the bargain. Moreover, he had free lodging at the castle, thanks to the interest of the duchess, to whom his aunt held the position of first lady-in-waiting. And with such a futureless nobody had a beautiful girl like that fallen in love. A girl who in her young beauty had assuredly not remained unobserved by masculine eyes, even in this little town.

Pshaw, Heinz, what nonsense! At most she has taken offence,—but it was audacious!—at that light kiss you pressed on her fair hair during yesterday's walk. But it was so natural, and she could scarcely have noticed it. Why had she walked so far away from him on the very edge of the path? Why had she caught her braid on a branch, so that he had to set her free, when he had committed the crime? He remembered that she had not spoken to him afterwards that evening, that on reaching home, she had not said as usual, "Are you coming in, Heinz?" And now, to-day? Of course, she could not know that he would be painting here just at this time; she had

only wished to see how he had progressed with the frescoes, for which he had made a sketch of her in her parents' sitting-room. She had come in at his request, but not before she had made an attempt to run away. Yes, she had been very different to-day.

"Good heavens, and that—that would be pure madness!" he said aloud. "If she only knew how many things I have loved, longed for, and striven for, only to give them up, so that I have finally come to find renunciation easy. First, was the school, when father died and it had to be the cadet-corps—through the duke's favor—there was no more money for school! Then my longing for art and my mother's lamentations when I begged her, almost on my knees, to let me study in Munich. I wanted nothing from her but the five hundred thalers. Uncle David's princely legacy. Then the military academy—but how was I to live in Berlin, meanwhile?"

"Ah, Aenne May, you don't know the world! You don't know what a miserable place it is for a poverty-stricken lieutenant! But it shall be a warning to me. I'm not a scoundrel; I will not disturb your peace of mind, I will not make you unhappy. This evening I will play the amiable villain before all the world; you will be surprised, Aenne May! I will see to it that you shrug your shoulders and laugh again in a few days and say,—'What a silly fellow Heinz is!' Cry about me, you shall not! No, I am not a scoundrel!"

While indulging in these self-reproaches and good resolutions, he changed his painting clothes for his

uniform, washed his hands, put on his helmet, and followed the same path that Aenne had taken, towards the inner court of the castle, ordered half of his armed force to turn out before the guard-house, gave the parole for the day, and then went to report to his excellency the chamberlain. As he walked across the carpeted hall towards the reception-room, Aenne's voice sounded from the music-room through the partly open door,—

“ Oh, crimson glow of the sinking sun,
How magic thy spell upon hill and dale ;
How thou changest to roseate ecstasy
The face of my loved one erstwhile so pale !

“ Ah pause ! Withdraw not thy rays
From the shuddering world !
In vain—it sinks in the glowing sea,——
Oh, sun, oh, love, how cold without thee !”

Heinz stood still. A pleasant smile passed over his face. He took a step towards the music-room. Then he pulled himself together. “ Nonsense, Heinz ! Keep cool !” he muttered and continued on his way.

Aenne reached home just at dinner time. Her father was standing with his hands behind his back before the tiled stove in the dining-room, which looked upon the garden. In summer the room was filled with a subdued greenish light, shaded as it was by two ancient pear trees before the window ; in winter, however, the midday sun made it bright and cheerful. In the middle of the comparatively large room stood the folding-table of birch, now

covered by a dazzling table-cloth ; the corner behind the stove was occupied by the sofa, the leather upholstery of which already showed rents and tears ; before it stood a small table. The opposite corner was filled by a corner cupboard in place of a buffet, in which the table service, cups, sugar bowl, and teapot, as well as a bottle of bitters were kept, and against the wall between the windows stood a chest of drawers with a small glass above it. Everything was of birch wood, the sewing-machine at the window to the right was alone of real mahogany and showed in its polished surface that it occupied a position of honor in the household.

To-day, aside from the odor of cabbage and mutton, there was a strong smell of ironing in the house ; the doctor's wife had been pressing with her own hands her daughter's white muslin gown for the evening toilet. A slight odor of benzine from cleaned gloves added pungency to the atmosphere.

Aenne threw open a window at once and immediately reproaches were heaped upon her. Her father hastily spread his red handkerchief over his shining bald head, Aunt Emilie called for a shawl, and the mother, heated by the cooking and ironing, cried,—

“Do shut the window, Aenne ! Don't you suppose I care whether I have neuralgia in my head or not this evening ?”

The young girl obediently did as she was bid, joined the others who were already standing behind their chairs at the table, and said grace. She ate her dinner with the best of appetite, had a pleasant word for every one, laughed, teased her aunt, and

told how on their walk the day before she had left her with Heinz von Kerkow, under the pretext that she was afraid of getting a cramp in her foot unless she went back at once and took off her shoes. Of the sunset and of the walk home through the dusky forest, she said nothing; in her eyes alone could be read the story of her new-born love, but no one of the three could read it.

She was bubbling over with pure self-happiness; it was so wonderful that she should have seen him that morning! And now—how was she to sing that song in the evening, the song of the setting sun! She knew how it would all be: they would sit together in some nook in the great drawing-room after he had brought some cold meat and salad and champagne from the buffet, as much alone as they had been in the forest, Heinz Kerkow and she, Heinz Kerkow, the gay, handsome Heinz, whom she had come to love above all the world.

It never occurred to Aenne May to look beyond this: she had become conscious only yesterday of her love, and it had blossomed out like a rose with a hundred petals. What was to come after, she did not ask. She drank in the happiness of the present in deep draughts.

She was in the gayest of spirits while dressing for the soiree at the castle. Of course, this solemn ceremony took place in the dining-room; mamma arranged her pretty daughter's hair before the glass above the chest of drawers, the shade was taken from the lamp that it might give a brighter light, and Aunt Emilie, who as an alien could not appear

at court, made an excellent maid. The room was littered with things; Mrs. May's imperishable black silk gown hung from the door-post, and the odors of the morning were replaced by the scent of Cologne water and almond soap.

"There—you are charming!" declared Aunt Emilie, when Aenne stood ready. "I shouldn't be at all surprised if you captured an excellency."

"And what should I do with an excellency, Auntie?" answered the girl, buttoning her cleaned gloves. "I don't want any old man."

The mother smiled. Aenne was so very lovely, and if she were as sensible as she was pretty, she would soon be provided for! The head-forester, near by, was extremely attentive and he was a good, fine-looking man. But Aenne seemed blind and deaf to his attentions.

"Is there to be dancing to-night, darling?" inquired Aunt Emilie.

"I hope so, auntie."

"Then I suppose Heinz Kerkow will look out for you."

"He will probably see that I don't sit through all the dances."

"If he only could, he would dance every one of them with you, Hans and Grete fashion," said Aunt Emilie, nodding.

"Heinz Kerkow will have enough to do with the five Asselbach Countesses, Toni von Ribbeneck, and the rest of the nobility; I doubt if he can trouble himself much about Aenne," said her mother, sticking a garnet pin into her lace cap.

Aenne cast a glance of droll commiseration at her mother.

"Do you think so, mamma? How dreadful! Then don't sit in the ball-room, I'm afraid I shall be utterly neglected." But her face shone with certainty of triumph.

Not one of them suspected all the wonderful things she knew!

CHAPTER II.

"I AM going to stay up to-night, for I must hear how you enjoyed yourselves," said Aunt Emilie in farewell. "I'll put on some tea and have a game of Patience." And so the old lady did, but from time to time she went to the window and looked up at the castle, whose long rows of lighted windows in the main building were shining out into the October night. The good old soul, who idolized her brother's child, pictured to herself how Aenne would go to the piano and sing, how, on being summoned before the duchess, she would kiss the great lady's hand and how she would then go whirling off with Heinz Kerkow in a waltz. She had long noticed that the two were strongly drawn to each other, and she had taken pity on the young people and, the day before, had left them alone in the midst of the forest, in the belief that they would come home engaged.

But this had not happened ; young people were very different nowadays, not as ardent, as impulsive, as they used to be. But she had expected something else of Heinz. Had any one told her : Aunt Emilie, young people are just the same, just as ardent, just as impulsive, it is the world and circumstances that have changed, she would not have be-

lieved it. But there was no one to tell her. Aunt Emilie had lived in the deepest seclusion, and was naively ready to earn the matchmaker's reward at the hands of Aenne and Kerkow.

She tried every possible combination of solitaire—would he speak to-night? None of them came out right. She grew feverish with impatience to see Aenne again; she could tell at the very first glance whether the great event had taken place, since she saw yesterday evening that the young people had come nearer together, for Aenne had come in as flushed and as radiant as though some of the evening glow were still lingering about her. Something must happen to-night!

The hours passed until twelve o'clock, when the entertainment at the castle ended, on account of the advanced age of the duchess. Aunt Emilie, who had dozed off on the sofa, heard the house door open, rubbed the sleep from her eyes, and looking up at the arrivals, her glance naturally sought Aenne. A white, tired face was turned towards her.

"Why, darling, are you ill?" she cried.

"No, only tired," was the listless answer. Then, with a hasty nod to her aunt and a dull "Good-night," she was gone.

"What is the matter with Aenne?" the old lady asked in alarm.

"Perhaps the singing tired her," said the Herr Rath, yawning.

"As though that ever tired her! No, she must have danced too much."

"Oh!" exclaimed the plump, little Mrs. May,

"she only danced once, a polonaise, with Günther, the head forester and an extra with Kerkow. The rooms teemed with ladies, and the few men there had their hands full with the countesses, who were out in full force."

"But Kerkow," said Aunt Emilie, waxing indignant, "might have danced with her oftener, when he is here to dinner several times a week."

"Oh, he was fully taken up with Miss Ribbeneck," was the laughing reply of Mrs. May, who had finally succeeded in divesting herself of her wraps and was now helping her husband.

"We'd better go to bed now, May. The duchess may ring you up. Don't forget to put the seventy-five pfennings you won at whist in the savings box. Aenne needs a new party dress badly for Christmas."

The doctor nodded. He was exhausted from standing so long during the concert, "the sing-song and piano thumping," as he called it. The lobster, mayonnaise and caviare had not held out until his turn came, and he had had to put up with a somewhat cold slice of venison and herring salad. The last, moreover, had not been to his taste; only one person could prepare it as it should be prepared, and that was his wife. Then, too, the game of whist with the chief justice, the head forester, and the court chaplain. The others had all wanted to make the game for a groschen, but he had insisted upon a pfenning. He invariably lost, but to-night he had won. That would have brought him seven marks and fifty pfenning—well, it couldn't be helped now!

With a yawning good-night to his sister, he followed his wife from the room. Aunt Emilie remained behind, gathered up the cards, closed the shutters, and crept on her slippered feet up to her gable room, which was next to Aenne's and communicated with it only by a curtain door, that on Aenne's side, however, was obstructed by a wardrobe. The old lady tiptoed over to this door and listened; she thought she heard the girl moving about, and called,—

"Golden-hair, dear, are you awake? May I come in?"

No answer.

With a sigh, she undressed and went to bed. What could it mean? Had she taken it to heart because Kerkow had danced only once with her? "Young people are so foolish when they are in love! It is an April shower—the child will go to sleep and to-morrow she'll be herself again."

About three o'clock, the old lady awoke. She thought that she heard some one calling, and, as she sat up in bed, she heard convulsive sobs from the other side of the wall, where Aenne's bed stood.

"Aenne!" she cried and knocked upon the wall. "Child, what is the matter?"

There was silence and no answer came.

* * * * *

And up yonder, in the third story of the castle, Heinz von Kerkow was pacing back and forth in his two rooms. A man does not weep over such things, but his heart was heavy, very heavy. He

could not forget the white face, the fixed, questioning eyes that had rested upon him. While she was singing, he had meant to go into another room ; but he had remained, as though chained to the spot. And how she had sung

“ Oh, crimson glow of the setting sun ! ”

Such longing in the voice, such joy in the exquisite face ! She had not glanced at him as she sang ; there was not a trace of coquetry in this girl ; but he knew that every word was for him. And how sweet she had looked in her white dress, how self-possessed and graceful she had been when she made her low obeisance before the duchess ! The rest of the “ crowd,” as he disrespectfully termed them, were nothing compared with her, in spite of titles and coronets.

Then supper had been served ; she had stood there waiting for him with a smile, as she had promised that morning, and he had come to her and had begun to play his part, ceremoniously, morosely ; he talked of the heat of the rooms, and said he should be glad when the evening was over ; that he was tired of the life here, and was going to try for an appointment in Berlin ; and she had stared at him, as though she feared he had taken leave of his senses.

“ Why, you can see for yourself, how it is, Miss May.” He had called her Miss May. “ The neighborhood, yes, the neighborhood is pretty, but this everlasting nature ! And then the commonplaceness of the surroundings ! ” He felt he was

wearying her with his talk, he said, and he must see to his aunt and Miss Ribbeneck.

With that he had left her, without looking in her face, and had devoted himself to Toni Ribbeneck with desperate energy. Once, however, he looked across at her ; something seemed to draw his eyes in that direction. She was sitting on one of the red damask chairs that stood against the white and gold walls of the little ball-room, and his heart sank. Her face was white as the wall behind her, her eyes were fixed upon him, imploringly, uncomprehendingly ; her lips were quivering—he would never forget it, never ! He had felt very much as he had when he brought down his first deer. He had only wounded the creature, and had found it dying not far from the spot on which he had shot it, and it had looked at him as Aenne looked at him. He was hateful, to himself—good God, if there were only some way out of it ! But what ? No—better a sorrowful ending than a sorrow without end—he must not go to her !

But in spite of his forced endeavors to see things in a sensible light, he could not help losing himself in dreams, in sweet hopeless dreams such as only undaunted youth can dream. Perhaps it might yet be, if they were to wait. Perhaps he might win the big prize in the lottery—perhaps a rich uncle might turn up—perhaps—— That morning he had not realized as he did now that he was confronted by the impossibility of winning her—how deeply he loved her.

“Aenne, Aenne, I cannot give you up ! I will

not give you up!" he said to himself over and over again.

He started from his brooding ; there was a knock at the door. Upon his "Come in!" one of the footmen entered with a message from Madam von Gruber. If the lieutenant was not too tired, she would like to speak with him at once.

He glanced in surprise at the clock—it was quarter of one. Replying that he would come, he rebuttoned his uniform and went down to the second story, where were the apartments of the ladies of the court.

Madam von Gruber, a cousin of his father, was an elderly woman, of some sixty years. She stooped slightly, and her expression was somewhat haughty, as was becoming to the first lady-in-waiting to her Highness. She must once have been very beautiful, her figure was still slender, gray hair framed the delicate face and went well with the fresh coloring, which seemed to have been aided a little by art. Her married life had been a stormy one. Her husband had been an inveterate gambler. Of all his great possessions—he had come into three estates upon his father's death—nothing remained. When the crash came, she was about forty and still very beautiful, and after the death of her husband—he had died in Monaco shortly after the catastrophe—she had assumed the position of first lady-in-waiting to the widowed duchess, a position that she had filled faithfully and blamelessly for twenty years.

She had no children, but she took great interest in all of her own kin and not least in Heinz von

Kerkow. Match-making was her favorite occupation, unhappy as she had been in her own marriage, and she had long had her eye upon Heinz. So far, however, no such intention on her part had been apparent to him ; her interest in him had only manifested itself in the pleasure she took in having him come in and gossip with her in her leisure moments. He was so amusing, entered into everything with such spirit, and retailed the most impossible stories to his respected Aunt Christiane with the most innocent of faces. Occasionally, when the talk turned upon his mother and his two elderly sisters and the hopeless state of his affairs, he would grow tragic, and this would be the signal for her to say,—

“My boy, you must try to make a good match ; that’s the best advice I can give you. If I only knew of some one good and rich enough for you ! But heiresses are rare nowadays.”

“I shall have to go among the Jews, auntie,” he would answer invariably, “and I am sure that you will grow fond of ‘Miriam’ or ‘Rebecca,’ once she is my wife.”

“Don’t talk in that wicked way, Heinz ! That would be the last resource.”

“Ah, my dear aunt, a lieutenant will do anything at a pinch,” he would answer.

To-night, when she received him with a jest, he could not enter into it, nor did he notice that the smile on her lips was not altogether natural. He kissed her still comely hand attentively, however, made himself comfortable in an arm-chair in the

luxuriously furnished room, took the glass of punch that she handed him, but remained silent.

"What makes you so quiet, Heinz?" she asked, looking at him somewhat uneasily.

"One can't be the same every day," was the not very encouraging answer.

"But you were in such high spirits when you were dancing a while ago, Toni Ribbeneck said——"

He made a grimace.

"What does she want of me?" he asked, as though he meant to say: "I wish to Heaven she would leave me in peace!"

"She doesn't want anything; she is only glad that we have such an acceptable cavalier for the winter. You know, Heinz, we haven't a superabundance."

"Indeed? Well, auntie, don't be offended, but I have no desire to vegetate in this accursed old castle of yours all winter."

"Why, Heinz!"

Aunt Gruber let fall the spoon with which she had been stirring her punch.

"Yes, I am going to try to get away. I am tired of it here."

"You're an ungrateful fellow—or is it that you're depressed by what has happened?"

"Depressed? What do you mean?" he asked, starting.

"Your mother and Ottilie. Confide in me, Heinz, of course I know about it."

He looked at her blankly.

"Is it possible that you don't know?" she asked

in alarm. "I am so sorry, my poor boy. You will doubtless get the letter to-morrow, or perhaps it is lying on your desk now, and you have overlooked it. I thought that was the reason for your gloomy face. How tactless of me!"

"I beg of you, aunt, since you have said so much, to tell me all and not keep me in suspense until to-morrow."

"Of course I will tell you, Heinz, but the news will not make you feel any better."

"Good logic!" he muttered.

"Don't be so disagreeable, Heinz! Well, if you must know—Ottilie has come home from her place, sick."

He drew a long breath—he had expected something worse.

"What is the matter with her?" he asked, "do you know?"

She shook her head, and her eyes, usually so cold, filled with tears.

"It is something serious then, aunt? Tell me—typhoid—or—or—good God! auntie, don't keep me on the rack!"

"She has had to be placed in an institution—in a—you know, Heinz—her nerves—a—yes—in the——"

"Insane asylum," he finished dully. He seemed suddenly broken.

The old lady did not reply. She held her hands clasped in her lap and choked down the rising tears.

"And mother?" he said at last. "My God! how will she bear the blow—and what will it cost? What——"

She nodded.

"Ah, that is the question." Then she rose, went towards the bell-rope and told the footman who answered to bring down the lieutenant's mail. "Since you know," she added to her nephew, "and I am anxious to learn more."

In a few moments the letter was in his hand.

"From mother?" he murmured. "Ah, no, from Hede," he corrected himself. He turned the letter over and then stuck it, unread, into the facings of his coat, and remained sitting a while longer with compressed lips, staring into vacancy. At last he rose.

"It would be a terrible misfortune for rich people, but in this case—— Otilie has always helped mother. I don't know what is to be done. Poor girl! Poor mamma!"

"We Kerkows are all unfortunate, my boy—when we think of what falls into the laps of so many. I cannot help thinking of Toni Ribbeneck and wondering how she feels since she received the news, day before yesterday, that her uncle was dead and that she was the mistress of a nice little fortune—she is still young, twenty-seven at most! Money gives one such a feeling of security, you know. Don't you think, Heinz, that she has developed a very distinguished, self-possessed air lately? What are you thinking of, Heinz?" she asked impatiently, and, as he roused himself, she said, "I was speaking of Toni Ribbeneck."

"Ah, yes, what were you saying—that she had become an heiress? She may be thankful, there's

no getting on without money. Good-night, aunt; I will read the letter upstairs, I cannot just now. Thank you for your sympathy."

In his room, he flung himself upon the sofa and groaned. He could picture so plainly his mother and sisters far away in the little Brandenburg town; the lodgings in the dreary street, three rooms, kitchen and hall in the one-story house of the tradesman Busch, whose shop unfailingly supplied the rooms with the odors of the stock in trade. The walls of the frame building were somewhat out of plumb, the carpets and hangings were cheap, worn, and tasteless, the mahogany furniture decrepit. In the parlor was a faded carpet of large floral design, in the sitting-room was his younger sister's painting-table, the air filled with the smell of turpentine which she used for her china painting, at one of the windows stood his mother's arm-chair before the sewing-table piled high with colored worsteds, for while his sister painted, his mother embroidered, for bread.

And how must the house look now? What could have happened? Otilie, his quiet, sensible sister, who always had a word of good advice for each, and help and comfort for them all, Otilie insane! He took the letter, opened it, and drew the lamp nearer. It was Hede who wrote, the handwriting was uncertain and the paper was blotted with tears.

DEAR HEINZ,—A terrible thing has happened. You will already know what it is when this letter reaches you, for I asked Dr. Allers to write auntie,

that she might prepare you for the sad news. The details are so terrible, Heinz, I cannot describe to you how Otilie looked when she came home unexpectedly four days ago. Her letters had been perfectly rational, the only thing that struck us was that she kept speaking of some great good fortune that was coming to her. We did not ask what it was, but we hoped that she was about to become engaged. Two years ago, she intimated that the brother of Madame Hennig, whose companion she has been, was interested in her; he is a banker in Berlin and said to be very rich. It would, indeed, have been a piece of great good fortune for us.

"Imagine our dismay when, on Tuesday, Otilie, whom we supposed in Berlin, came suddenly into our rooms, wearing an extraordinary Rembrandt hat, pale, her eyes gleaming; she said, as though we had seen her only the day before, that her bridegroom was coming to ask mamma's consent, the wedding was to take place in a week, and we were to see to the supper and not forget the champagne. Then she threw her hat upon the table, went to mamma's china cupboard, took out the cups and saucers, and, when mamma, shaking with terror, tried to stop her, she grew furious, smashed the glass doors of the cupboard, dashed everything from the table, and raged so that we had to call to our landlord for help—the man held her until Doctor Allers came. He sent for a nurse and——

"Oh, Heinz, how terrible it is! She was taken to Halle two hours ago. They told her she was going to Berlin, where her bridegroom was waiting for

her. She went willingly, radiant with happiness, said good-bye to us tenderly and told us we must come and visit her soon.

"Mamma is in bed, prostrated by the shock. I had to leave Otilie to strangers on the dreadful journey ; mamma is so broken I could not go.

"Heinz, what could have happened to her to make her so? Will it ever be explained?

"A letter from the lady with whom she was, says that she went away secretly, and that she had lately fallen into fits of passion without any cause.

"And now, Heinz, don't be angry! Mamma cannot send you your October allowance. We have already had to draw upon our money in the savings bank. Whether mamma will be able to send you anything in November, or indeed——. We will do all we can, but please, please help yourself meanwhile. If we can get Otilie into the asylum at Halle, free, we may be able to manage. My head is so heavy. Write a few kind words to mamma to comfort her and soothe her. Tell her that you don't need the allowance—even if it isn't true, for I know that you were counting upon it—but—oh, it is awful!

"With much love,

"Your unhappy sister,

"HEDE."

The young man put out the light abruptly ; the room was dark and silent ; in the forest without, the wind moaned and shrieked through the trees, the rain splashed against the windows. It was the

autumn storm that had been gathering. Heinz Kerkow broke suddenly into a short, scornful laugh.

“You may congratulate yourself, Aenne, upon being well rid of the poor devil with empty pockets! It was touch and go this morning, and he might have kissed the love vows from your lips. Aenne, sweet, little Aenne, you will soon forget him, and he—will marry some one else. What else is there left for him to do? One cannot starve, one cannot let one’s people starve! If I could only work with my two strong arms, I would live like a slave to save money for you, Aenne, and for the others; that would be something, but as it is! My mother would die if I were to discard my uniform, and even if she did not, she and my sisters too would have starved to death before I could support them, and you, sunny little Aenne, would have become old and gray and embittered. Forward, then! Farewell, Aenne; perhaps some day you will learn how much I have loved you!”

He did not laugh now. He had laid his head with its crisp hair upon his arm, and—it was well that it was dark and the storm was howling. Heinz von Kerkow himself did not want to hear or see that he was weeping, weeping over the wretchedness of his lot and over his lost love.

CHAPTER III.

THE following morning, when the first lady-in-waiting returned from the duchess's rooms after morning devotions, she found on her desk a note from her nephew. The contents were brief,—

“When can I speak with you?”

His aunt sent back word,—

“At once.”

He came without delay. Madam von Gruber, who was sitting in the bow window, examining the list of public institutions that must be remembered at Christmas time, looked up in dismay at the pale, grave man into whom the gay young officer of the night before had been transformed.

“Why, my dear boy, how you look!” she stammered.

He made a deprecatory gesture with his right hand, and seated himself opposite her. The yellow daylight made the changes in his face still more apparent. Involuntarily the old lady took in hers the hand that was drumming impatiently upon the table.

“Heinz, you know I have not much myself, but if I can help you temporarily—tell me, please. You would like to send something home, or even go home yourself?”

"You always hit the nail on the head, aunt," he answered. "I accept your offer." All expression seemed to have gone from his voice. "Not only on account of those at home," he went on, "but you know it isn't altogether pleasant to go courting without a farthing in one's pocket. Tell me—how much has she really inherited? But no, a little more or less doesn't matter, nor do I care to know my purchase price; I might discover that I am worth more than her few paltry thousands."

Madame von Gruber had risen abruptly.

"Heinz," she cried angrily, "I always thought that you were a man of fine feeling, but——"

"My dear aunt, don't get excited. With the best will in the world, I am not in a position to play a part with you in a matter that is entirely after your own heart, indeed, a cherished scheme of yours—you know that better than I do. We could both of us lie to each other to make the thing seem a little more dignified, but I cannot—yet; I must accustom myself to this farce——don't look so horrified! You know, aunt, that this marriage for money has become a question of existence—and not of my own alone. God knows, that if I had only myself to think of, I should leave here to-morrow for some place where a man can work at anything and live on dry bread if he wants to. But my mother, you know—well, we understand each other, and before going to an agent, I ask you how it is with Toni."

The old lady had seated herself again.

"You want her only for her money, Heinz? You

care nothing for her?" she asked, trying to draw from him some word of extenuation.

But he would not comply.

"Yes!" he answered curtly. "Don't question me so, aunt. I am taking her for her money, as she presumably takes me because she wants a husband, as is well known both here and at the capital. She has spread her net for every officer who has been in command here, and for me likewise; very well, I will let myself be caught; it will spare me the trouble of looking further; and, aunt, I ask you to be my mediator and at once, if you can. I admit I'm impatient to be off. I want to see my mother,"

"But, good heavens, such haste! What will Toni think?"

"She will find it quite natural. I made desperate love to her last night."

"You already intended——"

"No, no, but it is very well now that I did."

"But, Heinz, if she were to see from what a desperate mood this offer comes?"

"You can safely leave my conduct towards her to me. All I ask is that you prepare her. Manage it as you please. If you bring me a favorable reply, I shall write to her."

"Why don't you do your wooing in person, Heinz?"

"I can do it better by letter."

"And when do you want me to—Toni is reading to her Highness now—perhaps while her Highness is conferring with his Excellency and Toni is in the music-room?"

"As you think best, aunt! To a musical accompaniment, if you choose."

"But, Heinz, so soon?"

"At once, aunt, at once, if possible! Let me know the result. As soon as I have her consent, I shall go to my mother."

An hour later, Madam von Gruber sent her nephew this message,—

"I congratulate you. She loves you!"

He had abandoned the idea of writing to Toni von Ribbeneck; it would have been cowardly, and he was no coward. He took up his helmet, announced his coming, and was shortly after conducted to her reception-room, which was furnished in faded blue and white brocade and somewhat extravagantly decorated by its present inmate with statuettes, polar-bear skins, bric-à-brac, and photographs. A strong odor of pachouli greeted him and rendered his already painful breathing yet more difficult. His glance wandered about the room. Toni von Ribbeneck was not there. He tried to pull himself together, but it was impossible for him to imagine how he was to get through the next quarter of an hour. So he stood still, and stared at a Japanese screen, embroidered with brilliant birds.

Good God, how very differently he had pictured his wooing!

She entered, small, blonde, angular. Not a trace of maidenly embarrassment was on the round face; the eyes, which were large and colorless, were fixed upon him expectantly and yet as though she had no idea of what had brought him. She wore a house-

gown of dull blue plush, as faded as her eyes and as lustreless as her blonde hair that was tightly drawn back from her forehead.

It seemed to him as though an unseen power were drawing him towards the door again. This was not the woman he could take in his arms and call his wife! But there rose again before his mind the grief-stricken face of his mother.

"Gnädiges Fraulein," he stammered at last, "you know why I am standing here before you——"

She inclined her head silently and seated herself on the fauteuil that stood back of the screen, motioning him to take one of the ottomans opposite her. The dazzling light from the window fell full upon him, while she sat in shadow. She still sat in silence, with neither word nor look did she come to his assistance; she wished to enjoy to the full the exhilarating sensation of having a man ask her to be his wife.

"Do you not suspect," he began at last, "can you not guess that I am about to ask a great, a very great, favor of you, that I——"

"That you have come to say to me, 'I love you, Toni!'" she interrupted in her sharp, unsympathetic voice.

He bowed in assent.

"And that you want to marry me!"

Another silent bow.

"But suppose that I were not in a position, that I—it is so sudden!"

She played with the ribbons on her dress, smiling coquettishly.

He rose at once,—

“Forgive me, gnädiges Fräulein !”

Her smile vanished instantly.

“But Lieutenant Kerkow !” she exclaimed in confusion, and extended her arm as though to stop him.

“I am in no mood for trifling,” he burst out.

“Well, then, we will be serious,” she said and held out her hand which he raised slowly to his lips. “And, I may as well tell you, I—I suspected that you would come to-day.”

“My aunt——” he murmured.

“No, since last evening—since the supper waltz.”

This was the waltz with which he had wished to “cure” Aenne. He grew red with self-contempt and kissed her hand again.

She was silent, and look with satisfied eyes at the man she had so long desired.

“Kerkow,” she said softly, “why did you not come before ?”

He stammered something about “not daring.” Then he felt her arms about his neck, she drew herself up to him, and her cheek touched his.

“Heinz, I know that you have loved me for a long, long time.”

He looked down at her with troubled eyes as she pressed her head against his breast.

“A long time? No !” he said, unable to let her remain in error. “I have always liked and admired you, but the resolve to ask you to be my wife is only recent.”

She started up and stared at him, an expression of deep chagrin about her mouth.

"Indeed!" she answered.

"I am a fanatic on the subject of truth, and I cannot lie to the woman who is to be my wife," he went on.

She bit her under lip; she knew quite well that formerly he had avoided rather than sought her; but she had supposed that he would say, "Yes, Toni, for a long time!" And then she could have written to her family, "I was his only love!" "Then you loved another?" she asked harshly.

He clenched his hands. What was his past to her?

"Baroness," he said, curtly, "hitherto, I have never thought of marriage!" He avoided the word "love."

"And how did it come so suddenly?"

She raised her eyes languishingly.

"How did it come?" he repeated with knitted brows.

"Forgive me! I am tormenting you!" she cried in alarm.

He seemed to be on the point of making a farewell bow and leaving the room with clinking spurs. She flung herself upon the divan, weeping.

"I beg you to forgive me," he began. "I may have been unkind, Toni, but I cannot tell an untruth now any more than at any other time. If my avowal has disappointed you, send me away; if you keep me in spite of it, I shall be grateful to you with every breath I draw, for I have much to bear and am in need of much patience and consideration—from you."

There was something in his tone that awed her, and she had had no intention of sending away the handsome Heinz von Kerkow, whose fiancée would be the envy of the entire country-side. She had made an attempt to force him to play the passionate lover; she had failed. Well and good; he did not love her, but he wished to marry her—her or her money; that was enough!

She gave him her hand.

“Patience, consideration, as much as you wish, Heinz, for I love you! Go to her Highness now, and ask her for my hand.”

And she rose and offered him her lips.

He bent down slowly and kissed her coldly, formally. She shrank away from him. It was not a lover’s kiss.

And as he walked towards the door, her eyes followed him with a look that gave little promise of consideration, patience, and love.

“Shall I send him away?” she reflected. “Shall I?” Then she shook her head. “No, not now!”

At two o’clock that afternoon, the young couple stood in the small, red drawing-room before the great lady, and received congratulations that were full of sincerity, although her Highness was greatly disturbed at thought of losing her dear Ribbeneck, and Madam Gruber shed a few secret tears. The form and number of the engagement cards was then discussed in the room of the head lady-of-waiting, and then Madam Gruber discreetly withdrew, and a long, painful pause ensued. Heinz von Kerkow roused himself from his lethargy, summoned every

feeling of pity and chivalry to his aid, and drew to him the girl to whom not one throb of his heart belonged and thanked her for her unhesitating consent, and said that he would always endeavor to become more and more worthy of her love. Then he kissed her somewhat shyly and hesitatingly upon the forehead, but his glance wandered over her head to the window and rested upon the doctor's house in the valley below. "This is the last time!" he said to himself, for he meant to be a faithful husband.

The Mays were seated at dinner, and, at the moment in which Heinz's glance rested upon the house in farewell, the doctor, who was just swallowing his last spoonful of soup, was remarking,—

"And now for the latest; I had it from her Highness herself—Heinz Kerkow and Toni Ribbeneck are to be married."

"It is not true!" cried Aunt Emilie, and her startled eyes turned towards Aenne.

Not a muscle of the girl's face quivered. She rose silently, gathered up the soup plates, and poured out her father's beer as usual; but she could not eat. She remained at the table throughout the meal, however, and even made some remark about the news, but all that Aunt Emilie heard distinctly was,—

"I am glad for Toni's sake."

She went upstairs to her own room deliberately and without haste, and what took place there—no one knew.

CHAPTER IV.

THE following day, Aenne took her walk with her aunt at the accustomed hour. The lively little woman, her heart overflowing with pity, took the direction of the town, feeling instinctively that the girl would wish to avoid the castle park that day. But Aenne had asked, "Why that way?" And they had strolled through the beautiful gardens, gorgeous in their autumn dress. The purple tendrils of the vines twined themselves about the gleaming marble figures; the shrubberies were dyed crimson and gold; the trees seemed to be sorrowing for their summer bravery, the colored leaves lay beneath them on the wet turf or floated on the placid surface of the fountain. Aenne was very silent, and this was the only sign by which the aunt could read her niece's thoughts. The girl unconcernedly took the path that led to the castle terrace.

"It will be windy up there, Goldenlocks," said Aunt Emilie, nervously.

"The view will be all the lovelier. Last night's storm has cleared the atmosphere."

When they reached the top, Aunt Emilie, who was asthmatic, leaned, panting, against the balustrade, and drew her scarf more closely about her throat; Aenne walked slowly around the fountain

to the pavilion, where only yesterday Heinz von Kerkow had worked so gayly, and peered through the window. A few moments later she returned, a bitter smile about her mouth.

"Let us go now, auntie," she said.

"Who was in the pavilion?" inquired her aunt.

"A man who is putting such a thick coat of white-wash on the walls that you would never know how they looked before," answered Aenne. "Wouldn't it be nice," she went on, "if we could do the same with our hearts—cover up everything that is written there with a good coat of whitewash?"

"What an idea!" murmured the old lady.

"But indeed, auntie, it would be much better than to have to carry about with one something that one doesn't want, doesn't need, and that is a thorn in one's flesh!"

As she talked she walked on, her head thrown back, her eyes flashing. They had reached the park below by the broad carriage drive that led into the forest, and were walking in that direction, side by side. The clatter of horses' hoofs and the rumble of wheels sounded behind them. Aenne turned quietly to look at the passing vehicle. It was a court carriage. On the back seat sat Madam Gruber and Toni von Ribbeneck; on the front seat was Heinz von Kerkow in civilian's clothes, a rug and travelling bag at his side. He was looking in the opposite direction, where a tame doe was standing.

Toni, in a costume of blue cloth, a blue felt hat on her lustreless hair, nodded to Aenne with friendly

condescension. She had some color to-day, and, as Aunt Emilie inwardly admitted, looked quite human. Aenne nodded back, and walked on with an impenetrable countenance.

"If you don't mind going on alone, child," suggested the old lady. "I will go in and see Miss Stübken a while. You can stop for me on your way back."

Miss Stübken was the elderly spinster who had had charge of the head forester's household since his wife's death, and who passed for a walking epitome of news in Breintenfels, especially of that which came under the heading of "court news."

Aenne nodded; she was glad to be alone. She felt that something within her was dead, something that she must at all cost keep secret from every one, her pitiful love for Heinz Kerkow. The blood rushed to her head at the thought that he must have guessed her feelings for him, and she felt it imperative that she should give him a drastic proof that she had felt nothing for him but the most innocent friendship.

She knew what step she could take to show him that she had never loved him; it would not be easy, and yet it was the only means at her command, and almost as brutal as the whitewasher's brush, which had blotted out her picture in the pavilion! It was strange that it should have been done. Perhaps Toni von Ribbeneck had recognized herself, and had been indignant at her minor rôle. Well, her wish was law to him now—away with it, the sooner the better! Aenne meant to do the same thing; she

meant to blot out the picture in her heart, not with a smooth white surface, but with the picture of another!

She was walking meditatively along the narrow wood path that ran parallel to the driveway through a dense thicket of box and hazel; it was already dusk; the sun had gone down, not in a blaze of color, but had hidden itself behind a thick bank of cloud, and seemed inclined to leave the world to darkness earlier than usual. A distant shot echoed through the forest, then a cry high in air, and the dull thud of a falling body.

Aenne paused and looked ahead; some one was approaching her. It was the man of whom she had just been thinking.

“Good-evening, Mr. Head-Forester!” she said, a few seconds later, in response to the salute of a tall, broad-shouldered man who stood before her in a gray shooting jacket, his gun over his shoulder; from his game bag hung the large buzzard he had just brought down. He had an earnest face, bronzed by wind and weather, a full beard streaked here and there with gray, a straight nose, and clear blue eyes that were regarding Aenne with visible pleasure. He was not distinguished looking by any means, but he was vigorous and well-built. Nothing in his appearance bespoke the son of a common wood-chopper, but his character was simple and confiding, as is the case with all who live close to nature, and in his profession he was invaluable, as had been shown by the duke’s promoting him from the position of plain ranger to that of head forester,

to the disgust of the young gentlemen who had been educated at the school of forestry.

"This is, indeed, an unhopèd-for pleasure, Miss Aenne!" he began. "Are you going home? Then we can go together—that is," he added hesitatingly "if you will permit."

She nodded assent and they walked on close together, for the path was narrow and he held back the branches that they might not strike the pale face of the girl beside him. Aenne knew that this man had long regarded her with the most earnest and honest affection, but she had always avoided him; she had dreamed of a very different happiness—not at his side, the step-mother of his children—a full and perfect happiness.

To-day she suddenly inquired about his children. Her voice trembled a little and she looked down, but although she did not see the look of glad surprise that passed over his face, she could have told by his unsteady tones, as he replied, how deeply the question had affected him. He was not a diplomatist; all he could say was,

"Thank you, Miss Aenne; they are very well, as well as children can be who have no mother."

"It was his old refrain, but it did not make the girl shiver now, nor was it painful to her, as it had been—she had a definite end in view. However hard what lay beyond might be for her, she would not think of it now.

"I have not seen the little ones for a long time," she went on; "they used to come to us often but——"

"Why, Miss Aenne, I thought you did not care

to have them," he stammered, bewlindered by her altered manner.

"Why shouldn't I? I am very fond of all children and yours, too—why, I often used to romp with them when I was a school-girl; and when we took care of little Christine, when——"

"When my wife died," he completed. "Yes, Miss Aenne, and I can never forget what you and your mother did for me—such kindnesses bind us with bonds of the deepest gratitude to those who show them to us. At my dying wife's bedside I learned what good friends and neighbors mean. I remember how your mother came to me quietly and said, as though it were a matter of course, 'I will take the children with me, Günther'—and you, Aenne, death was such a terrible, incomprehensible thing to you, you were still so young, but you took the eldest, who could scarcely walk, in your arms, and—yes, Aenne—and——"

He came to a halt, and his face quivered with emotion.

"Aenne, if you would let me go on," he pleaded; "but I am afraid that it will be as it has always been when I—and that you will run away—I will keep silent, Aenne, it is presumptuous on my part, I know, and—besides, I have seen that there is some one else whom you——"

She had taken a step forward as though to seek refuge in the forest. But when he spoke of "some one else," she turned about abruptly.

"No!" she cried. "I—I will listen——"

It had grown almost dark in the narrow path;

the outlines of their figures could scarcely be distinguished. The forester had halted, and the girl stood before him with drooping head, as though she were awaiting her death sentence. For a few moments she heard only the sound of his heavy breathing.

"Aenne!" he burst out at last, in a tone that was like a muffled cry. "Aenne, I may? You will hear me? I may tell you of the hope that your pity at that sad time awakened in my heart—tell you how it grew stronger and stronger, how my whole life is centred in the one desire to see you my wife and a mother to my motherless children?"

His words, hurried at first, became stifled with emotion.

"Aenne," he asked again, taking her hands in his, "Aenne, tell me only one thing—it isn't possible—I am an uncultivated man——last night as you stood at the piano and sang so beautifully, I said to myself, 'No, no, it is madness! She is far too lovely, far too good, for an old fellow like you!' Aenne—I won't be offended—but say just one word—could you—would it be possible?"

"Yes," came the answer.

But as he was about to draw her to him impetuously she gave a low cry, and fell back in such dismay that he dropped her hand.

"Yes?" he repeated. "Then why——"

She had collected herself.

"Yes," she said once more; "but I beg of you—I am so—oh, don't be angry! Let us go home quietly. I will speak to my father later, and tomorrow——"

"To-morrow?" he repeated, astonished, uncertain.

"To-morrow!" she said in a tone that had a hopeless ring. "Not now—they will be expecting me; my aunt is waiting for me at your house."

They walked on in single file. The path descended abruptly, and the head forester went ahead to open the gate that divided the preserves from the pleasure gardens. When she had passed through, she held out her hand to him.

"To-morrow," she repeated.

But now his feelings overmastered him; he seized her suddenly in his arms and kissed her passionately; she submitted for a moment like one dazed; then she thrust him away with an angry exclamation. He looked at her, half laughing and half serious.

"Do you think I could have said good-bye just as usual to-night? Have you no idea, child, how a man must feel who loves you and whom you have kept waiting so long?"

She burst into tears and fled along the dark path; behind her sounded a happy laugh.

"To-morrow!" he cried. "To-morrow!"

CHAPTER V.

AENNE's one desire was to reach her room, unseen by her mother; but she did not succeed. The wife, who had had a slight difference of opinion with her husband, was sitting with a very red face in the kitchen, peeling quinces, and her anger at her defeat found a welcome outlet in Aenne's prolonged absence.

"It's time she was home! The idea of taking two hours instead of one for her walk! I've had to see to everything myself, without any help from her. What is a great girl like her for? To help her mother, of course! Instead of that, she goes wandering off with Aunt Emilie, who seems to have been created for the sole purpose of undoing her mother's training!"

The mother rose, laid the knife in the bowl with the slices of quince, and opened wide the door into the hall, so that she would be sure to see the culprit enter. She also lighted the little oil lamp near the door, which was usually done on festive occasions only. Scarcely had she reseated herself, when the bell rang and Aenne entered.

The mother shot out of the kitchen like a rocket.

"So here we are!" she cried. "It's high time! Now, my young lady, stir around and make yourself

useful! I can work myself to death, while other people are off enjoying themselves!"

On any other day, Aenne would have put her arms about her mother, who at heart was kindness itself, and laughed her out of her ill-humor—now, in her intense agitation, she felt the hot blood mount to her head, and, for the first time in her life, she made an angry retort.

"You speak to me as though I were Caroline, mamma! Surely I have the right to stay out a quarter of an hour longer when the weather is so fine!"

She got a knife from the cupboard, and with trembling fingers began to help about the work. The mother looked as though the last trump had sounded.

"Do you know," she gasped, "that you—that you are lacking in respect for your mother? You can stay away only as long as we let you—not a minute longer! There must be madness in the air to-day"—she was thinking of her husband—"but I will bring you all to reason, and you first of all—you——"

She choked with anger. The indignant woman had no idea how sorely stricken was the young heart before her, that it was in need of the tenderest care, the greatest forbearance. The good lady's intuitions were not keen; she had never been through any crisis of the heart, and was fond of telling that she had married her first love and had never had anything worse to bear than the petty trials of every day.

She was, therefore, almost stricken dumb when

Aenne raised her head defiantly and said with quivering lips,—

“I shan’t be here to trouble you much longer, mamma.”

“What does this mean? What kind of talk is this?” cried the mother. “Come with me to your father at once, and he will make you understand how you should behave towards me, you ungrateful child!”

Aenne laid down her knife.

“It means that to-morrow”—she motioned in the direction of the head forester’s house—“Günther is coming. He wishes to marry me.”

So saying, the poor little girl walked out of the kitchen as proudly as a queen and up to her room.

The mother remained sitting at the table with open mouth. Her brain was in a whirl with conflicting emotions—joy that her dearest wish was to be fulfilled, regret at her harshness and wonder at her child’s curt manner. She scarcely knew what she was about. The quince parings in her apron fell to the floor as she rose; she did not heed them, ran across the hall, and burst like a bomb-shell into the room where her husband was reading.

“May, May, listen! Anne——”

The conjugal quarrel was still rankling in the mind of the doctor.

“Thunder and lightning, what’s the matter now?” he ejaculated.

But he subsided at once when his wife gasped out her news.

"Really, old lady—really? A piece of good fortune, indeed! And she is willing? She is a fine, sensible girl, Aenne is! Where is she hiding herself? She must come down and tell us how it happened!" He ran across the room and called into the hall. "Aenne, Aenne, come down to my room, child!"

But there was no answer, and the doctor's wife said something about overstrung nerves and that she had better be left alone. She would go up in half an hour and bring down the "little bride;" and her face grew radiant at the words.

Just at this moment Aunt Emilie came in and was drawn into the room by the delighted pair.

"Who is right, now, Emilie?" asked the doctor triumphantly, patting his astonished sister on the shoulder.

"What has happened?"

"Aenne—think of it!" interrupted the mother. "You always used to shake your head when I said she would take Günther yet—and now——"

"Aenne—Günther? No, I don't believe it! It isn't possible!" exclaimed the old lady, quite pale.

The doctor laughed.

"She has just confided it to her mother."

"Then I've taken leave of my senses," declared Aunt Emilie.

"Well, sister, I felt about the same way, but it is true, nevertheless."

The old lady left the room without further remark, went upstairs, and knocked at Aenne's door.

"Open the door, Aenne! It is I," she called.

"Come in," came the answer.

The candle was burning in the brass candlestick on the chest of drawers. Aenne was standing before it, holding an empty box in her hand; she had been burning something in the stove.

"My dearest child," said the good old soul, "what have you done? It is a miserable jest!"

"You mean—my engagement?"

"With—Günther?"

"Yes, it is settled."

"Child, child," she cried, beside herself "you do not love him!"

"You do not know, auntie."

"It is dreadful! You are out of your senses. You will be wretchedly unhappy!"

"But, auntie, you are not sure of that! I am marrying as so many girls do, because they must marry some time. I am no better than the rest. Why should I pretend to be?"

"Ah, if I did not know you so well, child——"

"You do not know me so well, auntie. You will see how glad you will be to come to the nursery, where my life will be spent in future; the three little ones will need much care! I shall have so much to do that I shall have no time to think of something"—she made a gesture with her arm—"that lies far behind me. Come, congratulate me now, auntie, and tell my parents to leave me to myself to-night, and—and that I am glad if they are really happy over the engagement. Good-night, Auntie! And if mamma wants to very much, I have no objection to her sending around to invite

her future son-in-law to drink a glass of punch; I only want to be alone."

"I shall take good care not to carry that last message," declared Aunt Emilie. "And what's more, I shall pray the dear Lord to give you back your reason to-morrow, for rather than have you marry Günther, I would——"

"Auntie, don't perjure yourself—it cannot be altered now!"

Then she closed the door behind the old lady, who went slowly down the stairs, turned the key, and seated herself with gloomy eyes and folded arms on the chair at the foot of the bed. She stared across at the stove, where the poor little relics of her love-dream were smouldering to ashes, and watched each dying spark with a defiant heartache.

CHAPTER VI.

A FEW days later, Heinz von Kerkow stood by the bed on which his mother lay dead. He still held crushed in his hand the letter he had been reading when his sister had summoned him in alarm to the sick-room.

He had reached the bedside just in time to see the dear eyes rest upon him and take the hand that soon lay cold in his. His sister was kneeling by the bed, sobbing, and he stood there feeling nothing—nothing.

Unconsciously he crushed the paper still tighter; it was a gilt-edged card announcing that Medical Adviser May and his wife had the honor of making known the engagement of their daughter, Aenne to the duke's head forester, Hermann Günther.

What was it to him? He turned away suddenly and left the room, and seated himself on the old-fashioned sofa in the sitting-room, his forehead supported on his hand. His sister came to him at last and reminded him that the authorities must be notified of their mother's death, and there was so much else to be attended to that she must ask him to see to it.

He rose, straightened his uniform, and went to do her bidding; the crumpled paper remained on the

floor. Hedwig von Kerkow picked it up and smoothed it out mechanically; it was an engagement card, and in one corner was written in a girlish hand,—

“DEAR HEINZ:—You got ahead of me; I wanted to surprise you, but you were too quick for me. I congratulate you with all my heart, and hope that you are as happy in your future wife as I am in my future husband. With best greetings, your old friend,

“AENNE.”

Hedwig von Kerkow reflected a while—she had never heard the name before. Then she laid the card down carelessly, and raised the handkerchief to her eyes again.

Heinz returned, and the brother and sister sat together in the dusky room. They spoke briefly, now and then, of their mother and of their unhappy sister, and wondered if the poor girl would be able to grasp the sad news. After a long silence, Hedwig said,—

“I am so thankful, Heinz, that mamma knew of your engagement; it was a last gleam of happiness for her!”

He nodded.

“Is Toni coming to the funeral, Heinz?”

“I don’t know—I hope not.”

“You hope not?”

“I mean—I think not—she is still in the duchess’s service, and——”

"But her Highness will surely give her leave to come to the funeral?"

"Yes—but whether she can get here in time or not——"

"Haven't you telegraphed her?"

"No."

"Why not?"

The question remained unanswered, for his sister was called away.

He could not have Toni here, he would not—here, at least, he could not carry on the farce, in the presence of the dead. Nor had Toni had any thought of coming. She sent a wreath of palm leaves, white roses, and maiden-hair, wrote that the duchess had expressed her deepest sympathy, and that Madam von Gruber had told her how good and sweet his mother had been, and said what a pity it was that she had never seen her. She closed with a greeting to his sister.

Heinz had supposed that she would say something about his sister having a home with them; he would have been so happy to have had some cheering news for the poor girl upon their return from the churchyard to the cheerless, deserted rooms—but there was nothing! And this in answer to his letter describing Hedwig's condition.

"What do you think, Heinz?" his sister asked him that evening. "Can I keep these rooms with my uncertain income? If I keep well and all my pupils stay with me, I may be able to manage it. It would be terribly hard for me to go away from these dear rooms, Heinz," she added deprecatingly,

and looked at him with pleading, tearful eyes, as though awaiting some encouragement from him.

"Of course, Hede," he answered, "in any case, even if you should be ill and were to lose some of your pupils. Don't worry, I will see to it—and about Otilie too—don't worry."

"Oh, Heinz, what should I do without you!"

She went to him and began to sob softly, with her cheek on his.

"You take it too hard, child. Thousands of girls are even worse off than you and have no talents to help them along as you have. Suppose, now, that you couldn't paint, that you were alone among strangers, like Otilie——"

"But we were not brought up to struggle against such things!" she cried. "To be torn from a luxurious life after papa's death and to have nothing, nothing! An attorney-at-law with a fine practice can live like a prince, but when he dies and leaves nothing——"

"Hedwig, don't cry! We have no right to reproach the dead, and besides it will not do any good."

"I won't say anything more, Heinz; but I am so sorry that poor mamma could not have lived to see your happiness. Had you already talked about the wedding?"

"Yes," he answered shortly.

"And when——?"

"At Christmas."

"And will it be now?"

"N—yes—I think Toni wishes it."

"I think she is quite right, Heinz, and mamma too, would not wish your mourning to interfere with your happiness. Besides, you will live very quietly in Brietenfels."

"We are to travel at first. It is Toni's wish."

"Ah!" She looked at him in silent wonder. How fortunate Heinz was! "You are going to Italy?" she asked softly.

"Yes, dear, to Naples, I think."

"Oh, Heinz, how different the lot of brother and sister often is! Ottilie—and you!" she whispered with a fresh burst of tears.

He had not understood.

"And then—yes, then I will work and try and forget that I——"

He stopped. Why tell this poor, tortured girl that he would a thousand times rather beg his bread than live on his wife's money? Hede would not understand him.

"Work, I mean, to enter the war academy," he concluded; "that is what I am anxious for."

CHAPTER VII.

THE following morning Heinz paid the funeral expenses, the small bills that were still outstanding, the first payment for Otilie's lodging at the asylum, and gave his sister a hundred-mark note for the next quarter's rent. His mother's store of money being quite exhausted, he had written to a money-lender of his garrison and received the desired sum, payable after his marriage. He could not allow his mother to have a pauper's funeral, nor leave his sister destitute; he must borrow money—there was no other way.

The brother and sister paid one more visit to their mother's grave, and then Hede was left alone on the platform of the railroad station, gazing after the train that was bearing away her dear Heinz—to happiness, as she believed. She had sent her unknown sister-in-law many loving greetings, and a tiny cup she had painted with the Kerkow arms.

It was dusk when Heinz reached the station from which he had to drive to Breitenfels. A few snow-flakes fluttered in the air and the wind blew cold from the mountains. A strange mood was upon him as he walked to where a carriage should be awaiting him. He thought continually of a bright-faced, fair-haired girl who would greet him with a

loving smile on his return from that sorrowful journey, and would say, "Heinz, my poor, poor Heinz!" But these lips were now accustomed to say "Hermann," and their owner had told him briefly that this same Hermann had long been dear to her, and that consequently her whole sweet manner, her tears, her smiles, had been a lie and deception from first to last. He need, therefore, have no fears on her account! Ah, yes, but it hurt him none the less, for he had loved her—had loved, of course! He said the last words half aloud, as he looked around mechanically for his carriage. There was one there, but it was a court carriage, and he had ordered a one-horse conveyance from the only livery stable in Breitenfels. He could see no vehicle of that description. What could have happened?

The footman, who had been waiting at the carriage door, approached and took his bag, touching his hat respectfully. Heinz submitted in bewilderment. Could Toni have come to meet him?

"Is the carriage for me?" he asked.

"Yes, lieutenant!"

"Is it—empty—I mean, has any one come?"

"Baroness von Gruber."

He strode to the carriage door and opened it hastily.

"You, aunt?" he cried. "What does it mean?"

"Get in, Heinz—a tête-à-tête, nothing more. How do you do, my dear boy? You have been so much in my thoughts—thank God, the worst is over for you!"

The footman closed the door of the coupé, mounted to the box, and the horses started.

"Well, auntie, fire away!" he said with a touch of his old humor. "What's up?"

"You will be surprised, Heinz. I wanted to prepare you, because the surprise would be too much for you. Great things are preparing."

"Is it about Toni?"

"Yes and no—to put it briefly: her Highness is inconsolable at having to give up Toni; she declares that Toni is the only one who can read aloud distinctly enough for her to understand every word in spite of her deafness, and so——"

The baroness paused.

"And so her Highness wants the engagement broken off?" he asked, and wondered at the sense of relief that came over him.

"Heaven forbid! How could you believe that such a kind princess could be capable of such selfishness? No, on the contrary, she wishes you to marry, the sooner the better, but she wishes you to stay near her, in Breitenfels."

"Then her Highness 'wishes' something impossible," he answered dryly. "Or—am I to be Commandant of Breitenfels? A position that would have to be created especially for me, and in view of the large number of troops garrisoned here——"

"Do stop jeering, Heinz! Of course you would have to give up your profession, but don't be sarcastic, please! For a long time we have been without a court-marshal, who should form part of her Highness's household. His Excellency has under-

taken these other duties in addition to his own, but he is growing too feeble now, and her Highness hit upon the idea——”

“Her Highness did?”

“Why, yes—that is, I had talked it over with Toni first.”

“Ah, indeed!”

“In a word, Heinz, your fortune is made, if you consent! Think of it—the title of court-marshal, a home in the castle, carriages, so and so many weeks of leave every year. The salary is not large to be sure, but ever so much better than a lieutenant’s pay.”

“And my future wife, of course, is charmed with the plan?”

“You can imagine how greatly! Her Highness has promised her several weeks’ residence every year at the capital, you both to accompany her of course; you can have a delightful home there. I promised Toni to lay the matter before you in a practical light, and she hopes that you will accede to her wishes. Heinz, I confess that we are so delighted with the plan that——”

“But I am not delighted by any means,” he interrupted harshly, “and I have no idea of leaving the service! I have a good deal of honest enthusiasm for my profession, and necessity alone would have made me give it up—in other words—if the means necessary to keep me in the service had failed: they came very near it! But this necessity has been removed by my engagement to Toni Ribbeneck, therefore I remain.”

"You—you remain?" was the blank reply.

"I remain," he repeated; "and if my fiancée loves me, which I scarcely dare hope, she will go with me wherever my duty calls me."

"But, my dear Heinz, you are beside yourself!"

"By no means! I need healthy, congenial work as much as I need the air I breathe; I am a soldier and not a courtier."

"Good heavens! Healthy, congenial work you say! You will have plenty of that with your hunting."

"The gratification of a taste is not the kind of activity necessary to a man's peace of mind—I cannot live without some duties to occupy me."

"You would have the duties of your position!" she exclaimed impatiently. "What an absurd caprice, Heinz!"

"The duties of a court-marshal in Breitenfels, aunt, what would they consist of? In playing whist, in making out the lists of guests for your distinguished evening parties, and in doing the honors of the same. Don't be angry, aunt, but the Countess Arnstein and the wife of the court chaplain can reach her Highness's chair without my offering them my arm at the door of the ducal chamber; your idea is nonsensical!"

"But—what if Toni insisted upon it? What if she——"

"Then she will have to find some one else to take her and the court-marshalship together," he answered brusquely, and with a huge sense of relief.

He must bring matters to a crisis; if he were to

yield now, his authority over her would be lost forever. She was not to think that, because she had money, the man she had bought with it was to be her puppet. Better—the worst!

“But if Toni should prefer her freedom to your tyranny and narrow-mindedness, what then?”

“My dear aunt, you could not have heard what I just said.”

“Have you won the big prize in the lottery or has your mother unexpectedly left you a fortune?” demanded the baroness.

“Neither. I am fully aware of the difficulties of my position.”

“Then I don’t understand you!” And she threw herself back against the cushions as though giving him up as a hopeless case.

“I am very sorry, Aunt Christiane.”

“I beg of you, at least, not to bring the matter up to-night; go to your room without seeing Toni and I will try to make some plausible excuse for you. She is waiting to have tea with you in my drawing-room. You can have a headache or something of that sort—she must accept it.”

I have no headache, and I am not afraid of an explanation: the sooner, the better.”

“Well, as you please!”

The baroness wrapped herself in her furs and vouchsafed her nephew no further word. The carriage crept slowly up the hill, the first lights of the capital twinkled through the coupé windows, and Heinz looked out. The summit reached, the horses fell into a trot again. The young officer saw lights

shining through the shutters of the Mays' house, but at the head forester's all was dark—of course he was with Aenne!

Heinz bit his lip till it hurt. The man might just as well have married a nursery maid: that was all he wanted, and beautiful, clever little Aenne was to bury herself in such prosaic surroundings! And he—was he to live here and see the fellow gradually transform her into a household drudge, who live on dully from day to day in the endless monotony of domestic cares? Never!

The carriage drew up before the castle door, and Heinz assisted the baroness to alight. On the second floor she dismissed him with a frigid nod, and he went on to the third floor to his room. He was met in the doorway by his servant. It was warm and comfortable in the spacious, plainly furnished apartment. The kettle was steaming on the table beside the bottle of arrack and a punch-glass.

"Any letters?" he inquired of the man.

"Yes, lieutenant."

He went up to the table and looked at the large gray envelope on which his address was written in a clumsy hand. The postmark showed that it had been sent first to his quarters and then forwarded here. From Berlin? What could it be?

"I am going down to the baroness later, Scholze," he said to the man; "lay out my tunic for me."

Then he flung himself into an easy chair near the lamp, and opened the letter.

"Illustrious Leutnant," he deciphred with dif-

ficulty. "Does the leutnant remember old Marie? I often used to get your bread and butter for your school breakfast when you were a little boy, and roast apples for you on winter evenings, and you used to think a great deal of me then. And your poor, dear mamma always thought well of me to the day of her death, which came so suddenly.

"Illustrious Leutnant, we, my husband and I, are much grieved, and you will not think it presuming if I ask you a question at this sad time; it is only because a great deal depends on it for my husband and me, and because we have five children, and August, the oldest, is to be apprenticed in October to Finken, the cobbler on Nowlendorf Street. We are doing very well with our little shop, but we cannot well spare the interest from your mamma, which has not been paid for six months. I did not like to remind your dear mother of it, for I knew she would not forget her old servant; but now I would like to ask whether she left any directions about paying back the fifteen hundred marks and the interest. I beg the leutnant to forgive me, and I inclose the letters in which your mother asked us to lend her the money, begging the leutnant to let us have it back, if it does not inconvenience the Leutnant and your sister, as we have much need of it.

"Your respectful servant,

"MARIE SCHULZE."

He took up his mother's letter and opened it mechanically.

"DEAR MARIE :—In great momentary need, I turn to you, my good soul, and beg you and your husband to let me have five hundred marks at five per cent. I cannot tell you what I need it for, and I promise that it shall be repaid promptly on the first of January.

"Yours,

BERTHA VON KERKOW."

There was still another letter. This time it was one thousand marks that the mother wanted, and that had been given her by the faithful creature, the former servant who by hard work had scraped the little sum together. Good God, he had not thought that it had come to this! Had his mother been in such sore straits. And why?

He looked at the date of the last letter and the blood rushed suddenly to his face. Yes, it was three years before, when, because of some debts, foolish, thoughtless debts, the only ones of the kind he had ever had, he had asked his mother to send him the five hundred thalers which his godfather had given him on his confirmation, and which he had always regarded as a last resource whenever he went a little beyond his means.

He had asked for the money and had received it, but the original sum had been spent long before; in some pressing need his mother had doubtless used it for herself and his sisters. Poor mother—what must she have suffered! She had borrowed—borrowed from a former servant!

Yes, it must all be repaid—of course—at once! He would write to Wolf and borrow again; a nice

little sum already accumulated—payable after his marriage! He tore open his coat and strode up and down the room; a look of disgust passed over his face. What had he come to be? A man who went into debt upon the strength of his future wife's money!

True, he was not the only one; there were hundreds who did it in cold blood; but he—he had had other ideals.

And he wished to marry and pose as master, and force her to bend to his will, he who was wholly dependent upon her purse? Absurd! What sort of figure would he cut when, after his marriage, perhaps on their return from their wedding journey, the notes were presented to him? As court-marshal—any worn-out old courtier could fill the place—he might, perhaps, be in a position to pay them himself, but as an officer never. He laughed aloud. Well, then, let it go! After all, what did it matter whether he wore his chains as an official or as an officer? He had made a bungle of his life!

A few moments later, he entered his aunt's drawing-room, a hard expression on his face. Toni Ribbeneck sat in an easy-chair by the fire and looked at him questioningly, curiously; Madam Gruber rose and left the room. She would not stay and see him play his rôle of master, "the stupid fellow," as she called him with inward rage; but she caught a glimpse of a not very encouraging greeting on the part of Toni, whom Madam Gruber had prepared somewhat for disappointment in the matter of the court-marshalship, and who had assumed an injured air.

Great was her astonishment, therefore, when, ten minutes later, the young woman followed her to her room and said triumphantly,—

“My dear Madam Gruber, what were you telling me? It is all arranged. Heinz is a perfect lamb. As soon as I spoke of it, he declared himself ready to do as I wished. He was probably vexed because you tried to talk him over in your character of aunt.”

“Probably,” stammered the old lady, completely nonplussed. And when she stood before him a moment later, as he sat listlessly turning over the leaves of an album she said with some show of indignation,—

“I am glad, Heinz, that you have acceded to Toni’s wishes.”

“It’s all the same in the end,” he answered, closing the book ; and the face he raised to hers was so despairing and weary that she was startled.

“You are ill, Heinz ; your troubles have told upon you ; we will let him go now. Toni, will we not? You need rest, Heinz !”

“No !” cried the younger woman. “I have been looking forward so to this evening ! Why should he be tired? You won’t go, will you, Heinz? We will talk a while longer. Aren’t you curious to know where we are going to live? Here in the castle——”

“That has already been settled?” he asked sharply.

“Yes, of course ! Her Highness is so good, so kind, one would think it was her own daughter who was about to marry. We are to have the

rooms overhead, yours among them with a view of the square and the town."

"Ah!" he answered and then it occurred to him that he must have the head forester's house daily before his eyes ; but perhaps he would grow accustomed to that as to every other miserable necessity. And suddenly he asked, with a sense of relief that there was one bright spot in the matter for him,

"The apartment is large?"

"Ten rooms, think of it! Her Highness is more than kind."

"Then there will be one that my sister can occupy. She must have a home with us."

Toni made no reply, but Madam von Gruber, whose family feeling was strongly developed, said approvingly,—

"You are quite right, Heinz."

"But will her Highness permit it?"

"Her Highness *will* permit it," he said decidedly. "If she can allow herself the luxury of a married court-marshal, she will have to put up with her marshal's orphaned sister. You may leave the matter to me, Toni. I will speak to her Highness about it myself. I take it for granted, of course, that you have too much humanity and magnanimity to grudge a little sunshine to a poor girl who has had so little."

"Of course!" she answered.

But her good-humor had vanished, and they parted coolly.

CHAPTER VIII.

Excitement reigned in the May household; the doctor's wife was in a state of bliss over her position of future mother-in-law and grandmamma.

Aenne and her fiancé had made their formal calls upon the court officials and upon their friends in the little town; the calls were returned and the door-bell was in constant motion from twelve to one. Letters had come from every quarter, and one afternoon Madam von Gruber came in the duchess's name, bringing with her the great lady's congratulations together with a huge bunch of orchids from the ducal greenhouses. Madam von Gruber had remained a full quarter of an hour and had been very cordial, as Mrs. May did not fail to inform everybody.

At the head forester's wish, the wedding was to take place at Christmas or on the first of January at the latest, and Mrs. May had gone energetically about the preparations of Aenne's outfit. The whirr of the sewing-machine was already to be heard in the dining-room; a stout, elderly person with huge, round spectacles on her small snub nose, sat between mountains of white linen, with Aunt Emilie in command. In the kitchen, Aenne, enveloped in an apron, was listening gravely to her mother's practi

cal instructions as to her future duties as mistress of a house.

"Always boil a trial dumpling first—do you understand, Aenne? If it falls apart the dough must be made firmer. Come, child, a properly made dumpling must be rolled with the hands; don't go at it so daintily; what will your maid-servant think of you?"

Aenne made no response, but obeyed her mother's directions with the same impenetrable expression that she had worn since the day of her engagement.

"And this afternoon we must go over to the house, Aenne, or I shall have no idea of what you need in the way of table linen and towels. Günther says that there is plenty, but it is better to see for ourselves. So I have sent word to Miss Stübken that we would be there about three. It is fortunate, Aenne, that you can step right into a complete establishment, for the boys need so much—papa would have had to borrow money for your outfit."

Aenne remained silent.

"To-morrow morning you can pay your last few visits; do you know when Günther is coming home to-day?"

"I did not ask him, mother."

"You didn't! I can't make you out, Aenne. But, child, how awkwardly you take hold of that pot! Have you burned yourself? Well, it will happen sometimes. What I was going to say, Aenne, was that I have asked the children over here for dinner to-day; they are so fond of dumplings, and I think you ought to take a little more notice of

them. The eldest is quite timid with you. Why is it, do you suppose? Sometimes I think that the child must have heard silly stories about step-mothers; don't you think so?"

A ring at the front door interrupted the busy woman's flow of words.

"Good gracious! More callers? I can't think who it can be; every one has called."

She motioned to Aenne to keep silent and tiptoed across to the door, that she might hear who it was. A man's voice inquired if the lady of the house and Miss May were at home; the maid answered in the affirmative and ushered the visitors into the "best" room, saying that she would tell her mistress.

Aenne's face suddenly grew white and cold; the mother came back to her boiling kettle hastily.

"Heinz Kerkow, Aenne! I never thought of him! Go in and I will come as soon as I can leave the dumplings."

Aenne slowly unfastened her apron, washed her hands, and smoothed down the sleeves of her brown woollen gown. As she left the kitchen, where the maid was excitedly describing to Mrs. May the fine toilet of the lieutenant's fiancée, she assumed her old friendly expression, but carried head somewhat proudly.

"He must believe that you are happy—that you never thought of him—he must, Aenne, he must!" she said to herself, and set her teeth.

As she placed her hand on the door-knob, dread at the thought of seeing him again came over her for a

moment, and doubt in her ability to carry out her resolve ; but it passed directly ; she opened the door quickly and entered.

Heinz Kerkow had likewise had to summon all his resolution in order to make this call. He had postponed it from day to day under one pretext or another ; it was unspeakably hard for him to see again the girl who, he felt sure, loved him in spite of what she had written him of her happiness ; then he had told himself that delay only made matters worse, and he had determined, in his impulsive way, to go to her at once. He had meant to go alone and make one of his old-time visits, but it had suddenly occurred to Toni that she ought to congratulate little Miss May, and, beside, she wished to consult the doctor ; so they had come together.

As Aenne entered, she saw Toni looking over one of the albums that lay on the table near the sofa ; Heinz was standing by the window, gazing up at the castle.

“How good of you, Miss von Ribbeneck, and of you too, Lieutenant von Kerkow,” she began without embarrassment, and smiled, while a faint color rose to her cheeks. She seated herself on the sofa beside Toni, motioning Heinz to take a chair near them, and began to speak of the loss he had just suffered in his mother’s death. “I am so very sorry, Lieutenant von Kerkow—such a sad blow at the happiest time of your life ! You know, Miss von Ribbeneck, that Herr von Kerkow and I have known each other since we were children ; I know something of his family affairs, and can appreciate what this loss must mean

to him. And your sisters, lieutenant? What will Miss Hedwig do now? She cannot go on living alone; she is much too young."

"You are very good," he answered hoarsely. "My eldest sister is very ill, incurably ill, and Hedwig is alone—for the present."

"Quite alone?" cried Aenne. "How very sad!"

"To be frank," broke in Toni, "I can't agree with you. Thousands of girls live alone in far worse circumstances."

"True," assented Heinz; "it will not kill her!"

But his tone was so weary that Aenne was startled. She had not ventured to look at him before, but she looked at him now. He held his helmet on his knee, and between his brows there was a line that Aenne had never seen in his fresh, laughing face. He saw her look and pulled himself together. Why should this calm, friendly girl learn how it was with him? He had not believed in her message; he must, perforce, believe in her looks; she was the embodiment of happiness.

"Have you heard, Miss May, that I have hired myself out to her Highness, as housekeeper's assistant?" he asked, hiding his discomfiture over his future position under a jesting manner.

She looked at him uncomprehendingly; Toni made a wry face; the jest was not to her taste.

"You see in me," he went on with a mock bow, "the future court-marshal of her Highness, the Duchess von Breitenfels. Do you know what that means? It means to be the supervisor of house, cellar and kitchen; to arrange entertainments, to

keep an eye upon the immortal grays, as well as upon the entire household, to oversee the butcher's, baker's and other bills, to get up concerts, to make out elaborate *ménus* for distinguished guests, in short—a maid-of-all-work ! ”

Aenne had given him a reproachful look. For an instant her face had lost its color—he was to remain here ? It would mean for her constant unrest, never-ending pain.

“ Really ? ” she asked.

“ To be sure,” Toni affirmed ; “ don’t you think it charming of the duchess ? Her Highness will not let me leave her. Our apartments are to be where Heinz’s rooms are. You must be careful, Miss May ; with a field-glass, we can spy upon your entire establishment,” she added jestingly.

“ I am very glad that you are going to stay here,” murmured Aenne, but she could get no further—it was all such a shameful farce.

Fortunately at this juncture the beaming mother came bustling into the room. She was one of those women of the middle class who have a store of exaggeratedly polite phrases for such occasions, and for the next five minutes nothing was to be heard but : “ honor—happiness—pleasure—kindness—so good—so charming, etc.”

“ How suddenly it all came about,” she went on, taking Aenne’s place beside Miss von Ribbeneck. “ Two weeks ago no one had an idea of an engagement. The evening of the concert when Aenne sang that song about the evening sun—no one suspected such a thing, and the very next day there were two !

We were surprised, I assure you, surprised beyond words!"

Aenne was on thorns.

"Mothers are always surprised, even when they are perfectly aware of the state of their daughter's feelings," she said with a forced laugh.

"Don't you believe her," protested the mother, in defence of her maternal dignity. "She kept the whole matter to herself and then came to me all of a sudden one day with: 'Mamma, I am engaged!' Yes, indeed, you naughty child!"

"Mrs. May," interrupted Miss von Ribbeneck, bored by the conversation, "is the doctor to be seen?"

"Certainly, these are his consulting hours," the wife answered, and rose at once to secure Miss von Ribbeneck admission in advance of other patients. She put in her head a moment later to say, "My husband is at your service." Toni murmured, "*Auf wiedersehen*," and disappeared.

Aenne and Heinz were left alone: Mrs. May had presumably flown back to her kitchen and her dumplings. A long pause ensued; neither could find words to speak. At last, rising and approaching her, he said with a painful attempt at jesting,—

"So this is Aenne, gay little Aenne, the bride that is to be?"

She took the cue.

"And this is Heinz von Kerkow, the bridegroom that is to be?"

"Yes," he said briefly, with a grave nod, and added earnestly, "How glad I am, Aenne, that you are so happy."

"I am very, very happy," was her eager answer.

"And in the face of such grave duties—three step-children? Poor little Aenne!"

"The thought of the children makes me especially happy," she cried gayly.

He gave her a long searching glance, but remained silent. She had flushed slightly at the falsehood and went on hurriedly,—

"Heinz—ah, forgive me!—Lieutenant von Kerkow, there is something I want to say to you. Just now, when we were speaking of your sister, you were so sad—please, please write her that we will welcome her with open arms. I can answer for my parents. Let her come to us, don't let her remain so alone, now! You see," she went on excitedly and falling into the mistake usual with people who are trying to make some one believe them at all costs—the mistake of exaggeration, "you see, Heinz, that if your affianced wife is inclined to oppose you somewhat in this matter, one can hardly blame her—she is afraid of a third person with whom she would have to share some of your affection. But it is different with me, Heinz; I should be so very happy to have my old playmate's sister with me."

He was gazing at her fixedly. What did she mean by this. Did she think it necessary to tell him in so many words that she had never loved him? Good God, as though he were not sufficiently aware of it!

"Thank you, Miss Aenne; I believe what you tell me; I am only too glad to believe it," he answered.

"I assure you that every word is a comfort to me and relieves me of fears that I had been foolish enough to let trouble me. As to Hedwig, I must refuse your kindness at present, such a guest would be out of place in this happy household. Later, when you are the wife of the head forester, and Hedwig has a home with us, then if you will be a friend to her, I shall be very grateful to you."

She had understood him aright, and she felt the blood mount to her cheeks; so he had been troubled about her! Was he now convinced that she had never loved him? She must go on with the deception! She sought for an answer but found none. The next moment she hurried in relief to the door, the knob of which had turned hesitatingly. She threw the door open and her gay "Oh, ho! What's coming now?" made the young officer pause in his restless pacing of the room.

Three children crossed the threshold. Aenne took in her arms the youngest, a girl with crinkly, blonde hair, and round as the apple in her hand, and kissed her. The boy, dressed in velvet and carrying a pasteboard helmet and sword, was his father in miniature, sturdy, square-built, with defiant, childish blue eyes, that looked in surprise from Aenne to Heinz. The eldest, a thin little girl of seven, with a sharp, old face and tow-colored hair combed straight back from her forehead, held a doll under each arm; she made a courtesy to the strange gentleman and stared at him with her bright, lashless eyes, in undisguised curiosity.

Aenne had seated herself with her burden on the

window-seat and buried her face in the child's curly, fair hair. The boy stood before her and regarded her stolidly.

The full realization of what he had lost swept over Heinz, and he fixed his eyes upon one of the pictures on the wall. He could not see her fondling the other man's child, he could not see her again at all, it was beyond his strength. A man could not bear more than a certain measure of suffering! She had never loved him, well and good, but he loved her only the more, how much he had not realized until this moment.

And Aenne went on with her part, feeling all the while that something in her heart must give way, that she must cry out: Believe me, believe me! You must believe me! Cannot you see that this deception is almost killing me?

Suddenly a shrill, childish voice sounded through the room.

"What makes you kiss Mariechen so much to-day?"

Aenne raised her face in consternation.

"What do you mean, Hermänne?" she asked sternly. "I kiss Mariechen every day."

"That isn't so!" cried the boy. "And when she wants to get into your lap, you always put her down."

"You are a very rude boy, Hermänne. Agnes, take your brother and go out with him!" she exclaimed.

But the elder sister would not let her brother be scolded with impunity.

"Yes," she said with her old-fashioned air of importance, "and you wouldn't make a snapper for his whip and you won't make doll's clothes for my Lucie, and Miss Stübken says that you are pretending, that you don't love us at all, because you never play with us."

Aenne's laugh silenced the unruly little tongue.

"Run away!" she cried. "Go to grandmamma in the kitchen, you poor, foolish, little things! Take hold of Mariechen carefully so she won't fall. There!"

She had pushed the children out of the door, still laughing, though she was scarcely conscious of it herself. She reseated herself mechanically on the window-seat and looked timidly at Heinz, who seemed to have been unconscious of this little by-play. He was still standing before the picture, his teeth clenched.

"Children and fools——" he muttered under his breath.

Aenne breathed freely once more. No, he had noticed nothing.

"Miss von Ribbeneck is staying a long time with my father," she said as calmly as she could.

He turned toward her slowly. She sat with clasped hands, her head resting wearily against the mirror-bracket, her shoulders drawn up as though she were cold; her face was pale and looked sunken.

"It is cold in this room," she said in response to his sombre glance.

"Will you tell Miss von Ribbeneck that I have gone ahead to the stables, Miss May," he said sud-

denly. "I must initiate myself as soon as possible into my new duties."

Before she could rise, he had bowed and left the room. She gazed after him as he strode across the square, and then stared about the room as though she had never seen it before. Then a shrill scream from Mariechen sounded without and her mother's voice,—

"Aenne, do come and see to the children!"

She went out and took the sobbing child in her arms.

CHAPTER IX.

THE head forester's house, which was separated from the doctor's only by an orchard, was one of the most imposing buildings on the square. The Dukes of Breitenfels had always been keen sportsmen. Formerly, when Breitenfels was an independent duchy, the master of the foresters had lived here; but for some hundred years, since the two duchies had been united, this high office had not existed in Breitenfels, and the head forester lived in the house. The old walls of the two-story building enclosed noble rooms with lofty, stuccoed ceilings, inlaid floors, and wide doorways. In the hall hung life-size portraits of royal hunters and trophies of the chase; the broad staircase was ornamented by a fine balustrade of wrought iron.

This afternoon the freshly-scoured tiles of the hall were lavishly strewn with sand in honor of the expected visitors.

The head forester came forward from the sitting-room on the right to meet Aenne and her mother, the children pressing behind him. The big man was visibly moved and tenderly stroked the young girl's hand, which he had drawn gently within his arm; he did not venture to kiss her in the presence of so many.

"Come into the sitting-room, little mamma, and lay aside your wraps—come in, Aenne," he said simply.

Miss Stübken, who now appeared on the threshold in a black dress and fancy white apron, was most assiduous in helping them to remove their wraps. It was already dusk in the large room in which the simple household appointments seemed out of place, but the firelight from the stove flickered comfortably on the age-darkened floor, the coffee-table was spread with a dazzling, white cloth, and a pleasant aroma came from the big, white porcelain coffee-pot.

"There, Mrs. Mother-in-law, we will have a cosy cup of coffee first—Miss Stübken, where are your waffles? Come, children—which of you wants to sit beside your new mamma?"

No one advanced, and he drew forward the eldest child.

"Here, Aenne, I hope she will soon be a help to you. Be good, Agnes, and hand the cakes to grand-mamma."

They all sat down to enjoy the coffee. The house-keeper was over-solicitous in her rôle of hostess, and especially attentive to Aenne, who seemed unconscious of it. Aenne had learned the housekeeper's opinion of her through the children; she was not angry with her, for she was right, but she ignored her. What was the use of trying to deceive her? It was enough to deceive Heinz!

Miss Stübken was a woman of about thirty. She was dressed more elaborately than the occasion required, and her hair was arranged in the latest style.

She had the pinched look about the mouth peculiar to those unhappy beings who are driven by fate from one house to another and are always expected to devote themselves heart and soul to their duties. Since her engagement Aenne had felt the deepest pity for the poor woman, who would again have to seek another home, but until to-day she had never given much thought to her personal qualities. She now looked at her more closely and said to herself that she looked older and more faded than usual and that she might perhaps have hoped to become Günther's wife.

If he had only married her! she reflected, and then she shrank at the thought. What would she have done if his arms had not been open to her? How could she have proved that Heinz was nothing, nothing to her?

"I think, Miss Stübken, that you had better show the ladies the house while it is light," said Günther at last; he had spoken to Aenne from time to time, but had received only brief replies.

They all rose, Miss Stübken hung the basket of keys on her arm and went in advance. They passed through several rooms; all were scantily furnished and made a cheerless impression. The "best" room made Aenne shudder—the furniture was of birch, the covering crude in color and pattern; the carpet was flowered with roses big as cabbages; cheap lithographs of the emperor, the empress, the duke and duchess, Bismarck and Moltke, stared down from the walls. In one corner stood a carved and rickety smoking-stand. The stiffly starched curtains,

which had too much bluing in them and the inevitable mantelpiece clock, covered with a glass globe, completed the furnishings.

"Dreadful!" thought Aenne; and her parents and Günther had decided in all seriousness that she needed nothing in the way of furniture. For the first time she was seized with a sickening dread of the lot that she had chosen for herself. How bare, how dreary it all was here!

"It's a little comfortless now, child," whispered her mother; "it's because it isn't heated. A woman's hand can do a great deal; with a few knick-nacks, a few pots of flowers you will accomplish wonders."

Yes, her mother was right; it was warmth that it lacked, sunshine and flowers!

Miss Stübken now invited the doctor's wife to inspect the linen-room; she had made an inventory of the linen on each shelf.

"I will show you my room in the meantime," the head-forester said to Aenne. "Mamma will come for us when she is ready."

Aenne hesitated a moment, then followed him. She had avoided being alone with him since the evening in the forest. Now, however, she could find no fitting excuse, and moreover it was folly to seek for one. So she walked by his side through the great hall and crossed the threshold of the room opposite the sitting-room. The room was dim in the pale light of the vanishing day, but here too the flames danced merrily on the floor. In their glow were lying a number of dogs that rose growling at

the entrance of a stranger. Spartan simplicity reigned here also; there was a writing-desk against the wall near the window, a wide sofa over which fox-skins were spread, on the walls engravings of animals with here and there a pair of antlers; a gunrack and a clothes-press. A cloud of tobacco-smoke hung about the ceiling.

"Down!" he said to the dogs, and led Aenne to the sofa. "Come, Aenne, sit down."

There was a trace of embarrassment in his manner, and Aenne could feel how his hand trembled. She obeyed his request mechanically and squeezed herself into the farthest corner of the leather sofa. He seated himself beside her and took her hand again, and seeing that she was trembling also, he said gently,—

"Are you afraid of me, little girl?"

She did not answer.

"You must not be," he went on kindly. "I am so very, very fond of you, and it hurts me to have you shrink from me. Have a little confidence in me, Aenne, you must be my good angel—do you love me?"

He had pressed her head to his breast; his big hand rested heavily on her forehead.

She could not answer, she could do nothing but endure in silence.

"You see, child," he went on softly, "I cannot help wondering that you should have said 'yes.' I have no illusions in regard to myself; I have come from humble circumstances, I worked hard when I was young. I never learned to make fine speeches.

I am not good-looking and have three children dependent upon me. The only thing by which I might hope to win you was a heart full of love for you, child, and it is such a wonderful thing to me that you should have found it out! Or was it pity, Aenne, for me and for the children? Tell me frankly, Aenne, have courage. Yes? Was it pity? I shall not be angry with you—I have long wanted to ask you."

She shook her head slightly.

"No?" he questioned joyfully, and bent over and kissed her. "If you had said 'yes,' Aenne, if you——"

He had sprung to his feet and strode up and down the room, then he seated himself beside her again and took her on his knee, as though she were a child.

"Do you know what I should have done if you had said 'yes'? No, Aenne, I will not let you go—do you know?—I should have become a solitary man again; I should have set you free at once. I will tell you why, child. Not for my own sake—your pity would always have been a great joy to me—but for your sake, Aenne, because—I am going to tell you something that no human being knows; perhaps you will not understand, for in order to appreciate the full misery of it, one must have lived through it oneself."

She had started up; she was on the point of crying, "I do not want to hear your secret—I do not love you!" but he drew her down upon his knee again and went on brokenly,—

"I did not love my first wife! Aenne, do you

know what that means? No, you do not know. May God spare you and every one the knowledge, for if there is a hell upon earth it is that!"

"A hell upon earth," he had said. She drew herself away impetuously and rose to her feet; he let her go, he seemed to be lost in some old, painful memory, so still did he sit, staring into vacancy. She fled to the window and her eyes rested upon a light that shone from a window in the third story of the castle.

It seemed as if she would suffocate; the man behind her was talking on as though to himself.

"And when one feels in this way toward the woman to whom one is chained by fetters a thousand times worse than those of iron, when one thinks everything she does dull and awkward; when one sees in her only what is blameworthy; when she can do nothing right; when one longs to curse the unfortunate woman for every service she is obliged to render; when one wakes in the morning and the first thing one sees is her face, pleading, reproachful, and instead of pity one feels—rage! When one is glad when the house-door closes behind one—when——"

He rose and going over to her, drew her tenderly to him.

"Ah, Aenne, you have much to do to make up to me for the past, long, dreary years!"

"But why——" she broke out.

"Why did I marry her, child? Ah, Aenne, how can I tell you, how do such things come about sometimes? It may be from thoughtlessness, or in an

unhappy moment, or from defiance. For God's sake, don't misunderstand me! The last thing I would do would be to reproach the mother of my children in her grave. She was the niece of the head-forester at Brotterode; she was older than I—I, young, poor, and ambitious. I knew no other woman, and she loved me; she placed herself in my path wherever I went, and people talked of a good match, of a good, domestic wife, and said that dispassionate marriages were the happiest ones. It is all folly! There can be no happiness without love, without passion, I tell you," he cried vehemently. "No! or there are people without hearts, puppets who dance to order! And that is why, Aenne, even if it should kill me to give you up, I could not take you unless you loved me—for your sake! And now, we won't talk about my wife any more; she is at peace after many disappointments, she was not very happy with me, although I do not think she knew what was lacking. I did not let her see how it was with me. But, Aenne, it was just in this silent, indifferent companionship, this repressed pain, that the misery lay!"

He drew her to him once more.

"Aenne," he said with quiet fervor, and it seemed to her as though everything were whirling about her: she was conscious of nothing but her own unpardonable guilt toward this man, if she were to remain silent now. She could never feign love for him—never!

"I must tell you something," she cried, anxiously drawing closer to him, "I must——" And then

she broke into passionate, tearless sobbing and remained dumb.

At this moment, the door opened and the light of a lamp fell into the room. The mother and Miss Stübken saw only that the head forester held his affianced wife in his arms: her weeping had ceased abruptly.

"We must be going home," said Mrs. May, affectionately, while Miss Stübken, who had placed the lamp on the table, left the room. "But I will sit down for just a minute. This is a pleasant room, too," she went on, giving Aenne time to collect herself and apparently noticing nothing, "and I suppose that is your dear late wife?" she asked softly, pointing to a picture above the writing-desk, a photograph in a round black frame.

He shook his head.

"No, that is a brother of mine who died very young; he was a theological student."

"Have you no picture of your dead wife in your room?" stammered the mother. "Oh, yes, there it is!"

But when she took out her glasses to look at the picture she saw that it was only a finely engraved motto:

"Blessed is the house that is founded on love!" and below, I. Corinthians xiii, "But the greatest of these is love."

"A beautiful quotation, is it not?" he cried eagerly. "I think it must have been written especially for us, and we shall make ourselves very comfortable in the old place. You have full liberty to

do as you please, dear mother, for I shall be at home very little in the next few days. When the duke comes——”

“Is his Highness coming?” interrupted the doctor’s wife. “I thought he was not going to honor Breitenfels this year.”

“He will be here day after to-morrow.”

“With a large suite?”

“No, only some guests for the shooting; the duchess has gone south.”

“Isn’t the theatre to be open?”

“To be sure! His Highness couldn’t get on without that. He is bringing the opera troupe this time. My darling shall hear some good music: my seats are always at your disposal. How do I know all this? Through a letter from the hunter Zerbau. They will open with ‘*Der Freischutz*.’”

They had left the head forester’s house meanwhile, and had reached the Mays’ door.

“I shall come again to say good-night, Aenne,” he whispered, “but I must go and have supper with the children now.”

Then they parted.

Late that same evening when Doctor May and Aunt Emilie had gone to bed and Aenne was about to say good-night to her mother, who still had many things to arrange and put by, the girl asked, hesitating and changing color,—

“Mamma, do you know whether Hermann was happy with his first wife?”

The mother pushed her spectacles up on her forehead and stared at her daughter.

"You are going to be jealous of some one who is dead?" she cried. "Don't begin any such nonsense, child!"

"Jealous? Why, mamma, no! Only it seems to me that I heard that they were not perfectly happy."

"Perfectly happy! You little goose, what do you imagine marriage to be? As far as I know, they got on well together. Happiness? What do you call happiness?"

"I didn't express myself clearly, mamma, I mean, did they love each other?"

"Why—of course! Do you think that a man would mourn as he did over his wife as she lay in her coffin, if he did not love her?"

"It might have been remorse," suggested Aenne, thoughtfully.

"Remorse for what? For having been so patient with her for years, when she began to sicken with consumption? For having tended her night and day for three months on her death-bed, and for having brought up little Mariechen as a mother would? It seems to me that he has very little to be remorseful about! What made you think of such a thing?"

"He was patient with her, mamma?" the girl repeated slowly. "Do you think he would be patient with me also?"

"Let us hope so!" yawned the mother, who did not understand her daughter. "Only don't put him too much to the test. I shall be thankful when your wedding is over. I dread what is before us."

"So do I," said Aenne, softly, and she left the

room. Upstairs she seated herself on her bed. "I must tell him, and beg him to take me in spite of it. I will do my best," she whispered and pressed her hands together. "He shall not desert me; he must have patience with me also!"

And then she remembered his description of the dreary, hopeless existence at the side of the woman he did not love. "A hell" he had called it. And she was to give herself up to such a life, in spite of what he had said? She tried to imagine whether she would ever be able to endure him and the children. But she flung out her hands as though to ward off some horror, and then pressed them to her burning face.

"I will not, I cannot!" she groaned. And then she thought of Heinz, and the flush of excitement gave place to the pallor of cold defiance.

"It must be!" she said, "it must be!"

CHAPTER X.

WEEKS passed, and everything remained as before. Aenne saw Günther but seldom ; he was fully taken up with his duties during the presence of the duke, who would undertake no shooting expedition without Günther's escort. She had found no opportunity to make an explanation, nor could she summon the courage. Whenever she looked into his eyes that always grew tender when they rested upon her, fear sealed her lips. What would she do if he were to answer her, "No, Aenne, no—let us part. I know what it means to marry without love."

Could she go on living in her parents' house—under the very eyes of Heinz, in the fulfilment of the petty duties that did not require a thousandth part of her youthful strength? No, she needed other work, exacting duties that would so occupy her mind that she would have no time to look about her. She would not tell him until after the wedding, he would have to keep her then, would have to have patience with her !

In the right wing of the castle, which the duke occupied during the hunting season, the lighted windows shone out brightly into the night, and the usually silent castle square was full of life and

animation. Bills were posted at every street corner :
"The Ducal Court Theatre in Breitenfels."

Long rows of more or less elegant equipages drew up nightly before the hotel, for the inhabitants of the neighboring towns and villages and the owners of the adjacent estates came flocking in to be present at the performances, which were to them a rare treat. It was a recognized fact that the Ducal Court Theatre had the best talent at its command.

Aenne sat almost every evening in the box of the court officials, in one of the two seats that belonged to the head forester; the other seat was occupied alternately by her mother, Aunt Emilie, or Miss Stübken; Aenne did not care which. She neither saw nor heard anything of what took place around her, she was completely absorbed in the music; in it alone she forgot her ever-torturing thoughts.

The head forester's seats were in one of the side boxes in the second tier of the tiny theatre. The box was close and dark, but Aenne did not notice it. In the proscenium box opposite she saw, night after night, the dowager duchess, accompanied by Madam von Gruber, Miss von Ribbeneck, and the Chamberlain. Heinz she had not seen again; she knew only that he had resigned from the service and had plunged heart and soul into his new duties. Her Highness had said so much to Doctor May and added that she considered she had made a very valuable acquisition.

Aenne also learned that the wedding was to take place during the Christmas holidays. She could scarcely bear to hear it spoken of, but she controlled herself and seemed merely silent and depressed.

Her mother regarded this as the natural result of her coming marriage, but her father was dissatisfied with her appearance.

"She is nervous," he declared; "she changes color too often, and her eyes look feverish."

He prescribed quinine and ordered long walks.

"Take the children with you," suggested her mother; "they will distract you."

Aenne's heart rose in revolt. Since the day on which the children had told her to her face, child-fashion, "You do not love us," she could hardly endure them; she could not bring herself to a caress; she felt that they had found her out—children are better readers of hearts than we suspect—and her reply to her mother's proposition was a passionate refusal. Could they not let her have her few weeks of freedom in peace? she asked with flashing eyes. She wanted to be alone, quite alone, she did not even want Aunt Emilie.

Her mother was deeply shocked at this outburst.

"Oh, dear, yes!" she exclaimed. "Only do control yourself! I know that it takes time to accustom oneself to children; but I cannot understand what objection you can have to Aunt Emilie!"

"No, let her alone, sister," said Aunt Emilie soothingly. "We both know how we feel towards each other—it will be better by and by, eh, sweetheart?"

But Aenne made no reply, and took her solitary walks in the castle gardens, choosing always the same path, where she knew that she would meet

only a workman or one of the tame deer. The dreary autumn landscape, which was so in keeping with her mood, seemed to soothe her.

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon of a dull November day; the clouds threatened snow, the air was soft and still. The path that Aenne had taken led upward to an unused villa where now only garden implements and feed for the game were kept. There was a fine view to be had from here across the pond and the clumps of trees to the castle, which was especially imposing from this point. She paused on the little open space before the little castle of Louise, and gazed at the beautiful scene. From the castle tower waved the banner of the reigning duke; he intended to remain late this autumn and it was even said that he meant to pass Christmas here. As soon as he left—Günther had said the evening before—their wedding should take place.

"There won't be any wedding," Aunt Emilie would say at times, and for that reason Aenne avoided her. For the same reason she kept out of the way of Miss Stübken, who always greeted her with a malicious and pitying smile that changed to an ill-restrained sneer whenever she saw Aenne and the children together. The children met their future stepmother with almost ostentatious indifference and then flew to Miss Stübken's arms with equally ostentatious delight.

"Oh, for some way of escape, some way!" she murmured as she stood there; but she could think of none.

Suddenly footsteps sounded behind her, and, turn-

ing slowly with a frown at the interruption, she recognized in the elegant figure that was approaching the prima donna of the Brietenfels Court Theatre, Miss Jeanette Hochleitner, a pretty, stylishly dressed blonde who was known, eulogized and applauded by every one in the little town.

"Thank Heaven!" she exclaimed in unintelligible Austrian dialect. "A human being at last! The park is enough to frighten one out of one's wits, even in the daytime. I beg of you, most gracious lady, to let me have your company out of this wilderness; I am really very much afraid."

"You are afraid?" asked Aenne, half incredulous, half embarrassed. "It is perfectly safe here, and I—I have only just begun my walk."

"That's as much as to say, off with you! I'm much obliged!" laughed the singer. "But no, I will not go! I beg you to let me trot along behind you; I would like to go on a little farther, and there's no wind to hurt my throat; we singers like to talk to young girls sometimes. One forgets how to talk in this owl's nest of a Breitenfels, where the people all seem to be stricken dumb!" And without waiting for Aenne's consent, she gathered up her silk-lined skirts to protect them from the damp ground, and walked on at her side, still talking. "You live here—yes? I see you every evening in the court officials' box, where young Sternitzki's seat is. You know Sternitzki, his Highness's reader? I can't keep my eyes off him, he looks so much like my brother—my dear brother!"

"You speak the Austrian dialect, Miss Hochleit-

ner ; are you from Vienna ? ” asked Aenne, in order to say something.

The singer laughed.

“ So you have really discovered that ? It is quite an art—yes, I am an Austrian. Oh, my beloved Innsbruck, there is a city for you ! You must go there some day ! Such a city for a wedding-journey—you must say to your sweetheart : ‘ You must take me to Innsbruck, dearest, or I won’t have you,’ and then——”

“ My betrothed would have difficulty in getting leave, and I do not think he has any intention of taking a wedding journey,” said Aenne, quietly.

“ What—you are engaged already ? ” cried the other. “ My soul ! I was only talking at random. So young, and you’re to take such a burden upon yourself ? ” She gave a shiver. “ No doubt your mother talked you into it,” she went on. “ Mothers are always so. My mother wanted to do the same thing with me ; when I was seventeen, there was a man who kept talking to her of the fine position he could give me, and the thought left her no peace. Day and night she would fill my ears with it and say, ‘ You will be good and take him, Schani, won’t you ? You are a poor girl, remember ; father can’t leave you any money, and Fedor ’—that is my brother—‘ needs so much for his studies in Vienna, and who knows whether you will have another chance like this ? You’ll take him, won’t you, Schani ? ’ But of course I didn’t want to, and I stuck out my tongue at him when he went away, and I said he would have to wait a little, I was still too young. Then a dread-

ful thing happened ; my poor father—he was a physician—got blood-poisoning at an operation——”

“Your father was a physician?” Aenne asked, sympathetically.

“Yes. Are you surprised that his daughter should have become an opera singer?”

“Oh, no!” answered Aenne, hesitating. “Only my father is a physician also.”

“Then you must be the daughter of Doctor May? Yes, of course, I know you now ; you must shake hands with me. I am very fond of your dear father ; he cured me so beautifully a year ago—how glad I am ! He is so comforting at a sick-bed, and even jokes when he is torturing one with his instruments. My father was just the same, and to think that in three short days he should be dead ! And three months after his death, the same man came back again ; he knew very well that there was no property left, and that the mother and daughter were penniless. It was the same old story over again. Ah, how people talked to me ! They quite wore me out. At last I asked for twenty-four hours’ grace and they let me have it ; they thought they had me. But when the twenty-four hours were over, they found only a letter that I had left on a table for my mother, and I was safe in Vienna, with a lady whom my father had cured of a severe illness. Then I sent for my brother and I said to him, ‘I want you to take me to the Conservatory ; I am going to be a singer and I want to be given a trial. There must be some way for an honest girl to get on in the world without marrying.’ He opened his

eyes at first and said : 'What are you going to study on, Schani?' 'I must get a scholarship,' I answered ; 'they must surely have one for the daughter of a brave man who was wounded at K niggr tz. I will go to the emperor.'—Well, to cut it short, here I am ! It isn't such a bad lot, is it ? "

"And your mother ? "

"She was a sensible woman, after all, and read my letter with profit."

"What did you write her ? "

"Not very much—simply that I thought it wicked of a girl to marry a man she did not love only to be provided for, or out of spite, or for some such reason, and that I had no desire to be unhappy and make some one else unhappy, and that there were other ways of living than by getting a husband. She saw that I was right afterward, for the man who wanted to marry me ill-treats his wife ; my aunt knows all about it, because she lives opposite them in Innsbruck. My mother is wholly in sympathy with me now. She manages my house at the capital for me, and my brother visits us whenever his patients at Innsbruck will let him."

Anne remained silent for a long time, but she looked with large, searching eyes at her companion, whose words had been a revelation to her. It was as though a curtain were being raised before her, revealing what lay behind—a free, beautiful, glittering world. Oh, if she could only do the same—if she had only been told this sooner ! If she only had the courage ! But it was not for her.

Her head drooped, the curtain rolled down, and

from its folds peered the reproachful faces of the children to whom she was to be a mother, and she seemed to hear Günther saying, "Do you know what it means—a marriage without love? A hell upon earth—the most terrible of all miseries!"

"How sad your face is!" exclaimed the young woman, kindly. "A bride ought not to look like that."

"I don't usually. I am always gay," answered Aenne, controlling her thoughts with an effort. "But I have a headache to-day. I am very glad to have come to know you personally, Miss Hochleitner. I would like"—she suddenly flushed scarlet—"I would like to hear more of Vienna and of your studies"—she hesitated—"I am much interested in music. I sing a little myself."

"With the greatest pleasure in the world," answered the other. "I am always happy when I can jabber away. I have a suggestion to make: we will take another walk together to-morrow, into the forest, perhaps—I am so fond of the forest. I have plenty of time on my hands, we are giving only the old operas which can be staged in the little theatre here; they are light things, such as his Highness likes to have when the duchess is not here, for you know, Miss May, the duchess is very classical in her tastes, and detests Offenbach and Suppé. So do I; but what can one do? I naturally prefer Leonore in 'Fidelio' to Eurydice in 'Orpheus in the Lower World.' Well, what I was saying was that I have plenty of time to myself, and now it is for

you to decide where we shall meet to-morrow. I am as delighted as a child at the prospect."

"Suppose we say the same place," suggested Aenne.

"Very well. You will keep your promise, Miss May? Three o'clock to-morrow? And be on the lookout to-night. Rose Friquet will send a glance up into your box. You know the *Glöckchen des Eremiten*?"

"Oh, yes, of course!" answered Aenne. "My father will also be there this evening."

The two parted, the Austrian with a warm "Adieu!" Aenne with a friendly "*Auf wiedersehen!*"

"You have gotten good red cheeks," said the doctor's wife, looking up from her work—she was making some buttonholes—when Aenne came in, just in time for coffee, and seated herself at the table with the rest. "Did you meet Günther?"

"No," she answered, a faint shadow crossing her face. "But I had a lovely walk, and I am looking forward to the opera this evening."

"I shouldn't want to go to the opera every night," said her mother crossly. "There are only two nights in the week that one can have any comfort, when there is no opera, I mean. If I had been Günther, I wouldn't have given you the seats for the whole season; it's no kind of preparation for a future mistress of a house to sit in a theatre every night and listen to such nonsense. For my part——"

"Come, old lady, don't get so excited," interposed the doctor, laughing. "You used to like to go to

the opera yourself when you were young, and to-night Aenne is going under the protection of Günther."

Aenne turned toward her father in surprise.

"Why, papa, I thought that you were going with me."

"Yes, but Günther was here a while ago. The duke met with a slight accident while hunting this morning, and so they came back early. Günther will be free to-night, and mother wanted——"

"I wanted you to stay at home, of course," supplemented the mother. "It is to be supposed that Günther would like a quiet evening with you occasionally. But he wouldn't hear of it; he didn't want to spoil your pleasure, he said. He is making the same mistake that so many men fall into—doing everything their lady loves want; and then when they take the opposite tack after they are married, there's sure to be trouble. However, those that will not listen must learn by experience!"

Aenne defended neither herself nor her lover; she only asked after a long pause,—

"Papa, didn't you treat Miss Hochleitner once?"

"Yes, last year, when the duke's physician had gone with his Highness to the capital. She's a rare one!"

"Is she respectable?" inquired Aunt Emilie.

"Why shouldn't she be?" asked Aenne.

"Dear me!" exclaimed the doctor's wife, shrugging her shoulders as much as to say that the ladies of the court theatre hadn't a monopoly on virtue, as a general thing.

“Why not, indeed?” said the doctor. “But I don’t bother my head about such things.”

Aenne said nothing, but a deep flush rose slowly to her face, and she sat for a long time staring into vacancy.

CHAPTER XI.

"I do not know what to make of it," Mrs. May announced to her sister-in-law a week before Christmas. They were sitting in the dining-room after dinner, the doctor's wife, with the heightened color that betokened a coming storm, stoning a huge pile of raisins in preparation for the holiday baking that was to begin on the following day.

"You don't know what to make of what?" asked Aunt Emilie, pushing back her spectacles.

"She has gone walking again," answered Aenne's mother, frowning, "although I actually forbade her, on account of there being so much work to do. She had time enough to go walking, but when I asked her to make arrangements for going to the photographer's with the children she grew angry, just as she did last week, and it would have been such a nice present for Günther—Aenne and the children in the same picture!"

I can't bear such pictures," retorted Aunt Emilie, carefully pushing a little heap of currants into the bowl on her lap.

"Such pictures?" repeated Mrs. May.

"Yes, and I don't like engaged persons to have their pictures taken together; it is an unpleasant recollection as long as they live if nothing comes of it after all; do you understand, Marie?"

"Heaven forbid!" she answered. "You bring up delightful thoughts to a person's mind! If a couple can't have their pictures taken together three weeks before their wedding, I don't know when they can! I don't understand, Emilie, why you should continually be croaking. I suppose it's because you are always trying to find some excuse for whatever the headstrong girl does."

"Indeed, Marie, I don't always excuse her—on the contrary."

"Then you ought to tell her the truth," declared the angry mother. "She has always listened to you. But you sit looking on indifferently when it suits her to act in this extraordinary fashion."

Aunt Emilie contented herself with a shake of the head.

"Yes," admitted the doctor's wife, sighing, "you are right; it would do no good. Günther ought to protest; he ought not to put up with her whims. But he sits and looks at her with a blissful face, as though he desired nothing better than such a wayward little thing. I can't understand how he can be so patient! If I had treated May as she treats him, all would have been over between us in a minute."

"It's because he loves her," protested Aunt Emilie, in defence of the bridegroom's conduct.

"It's always so," lamented Mrs. May; "the second wives are always better off than their predecessors. When I think of how his first wife was! She anticipated every wish. But it's not so with Aenne. If she would only take a little more interest in

the children ! Ah, I wish that the wedding and the first year of their married life were over, and they had gotten a little accustomed to each other ! Sometimes, Emilie—it's wrong of me, I know—but sometimes I think she won't be happy, she acts so strangely."

It was on Aunt Emilie's lips to say, "The thought is a little late in coming, my dear. If it had been my child, I should have said, 'Think it over well; you do not love him.' But—marriage, marriage, marriage! That is all you mothers think of! I think I feel the need of a little fresh air," she said aloud. "The currants are done, and I will go and look for Aenne in the park. The only path free from snow is the main one leading to the terrace; it will be easy to find her. I will have a little talk with her."

"You will have a good hunt for her," grumbled the mother; "since the duke has been here, the snow-plough goes over all the roads."

"Oh, well, let me go. I have always wanted to see the park after a snowstorm."

Therewith Aunt Emilie rose, and returned in ten minutes in an old-fashioned, fur-lined cloak and an equally old-fashioned hood. She looked into the room for an instant, and then left the house.

The old lady had grown more and more alarmed about her favorite. The girl seemed to be acting like one who was not treading the right path.

"God forgive me," she murmured to herself, "but sometimes I think she is meeting Heinz Kerkow secretly ! She takes her walks with a persistence

that is quite incomprehensible, as incomprehensible as her curt refusal of any escort."

She walked on through the castle gardens on the firm white snow; it was still snowing gently, and at the foot of the castle hill the old lady paused behind a small, snow-covered pavilion, so as to get her breath in this sheltered spot. She had not seen a soul in the gardens, and was already quite discouraged when she heard children's voices behind her; turning, she recognized the head forester's little ones, who were taking an airing with Miss Stübken. Mariechen and the boy were seated on a sled, and Agnes was dragging them. Miss Stübken walked solemnly behind.

Aunt Emilie stepped out from behind the pavilion and greeted the new-comers.

"This is fine for you little people, isn't it? Good-afternoon, my dear Miss Stübken; have you seen anything of our Aenne? She is taking a walk somewhere about here."

Miss Stübken pushed back the veil from her shabby fur cap, showing her sallow face and purple cheeks, and wiped away the tears that the cold had brought to her eyes.

"You will have to look for her elsewhere, Mrs. Schönberg; Miss May is not in the park," she answered, looking at Aunt Emilie with a peculiar smile.

"Why, she must be! She comes here every day."

"Yes, she used to, but she has not come here for a long time now. She goes down into the town every day in the direction of Princess Louise Street; you know where that is?"

"Yes, yes! But what is she doing there?"

Miss Stübken, shivering with cold, stamped first one foot and then the other, and the malicious smile seem to freeze on her face.

"What is she doing there? She goes to see Miss Jeanette Hochleitner—I imagine they sing together. Perhaps they are practising something as a Christmas surprise for the head forester."

"It is possible," assented Auntie Emilie, quickly regaining her self-control, although a sudden fear had sprung up in her heart. "Then I will take care not to disturb her."

Miss Stübken smiled still more broadly.

"Would you object to our walking with you, Mrs. Schönberg?"

Aunt Emilie's liking for the head forester's house-keeper had suddenly cooled to such a degree that she could with difficulty bring herself to say politely, "Not in the least." Her informant's smile and manner had hurt her on Aenne's account. The woman at her side saw it and changed her tone.

"I have been wanting to tell you this for a long time, Mrs. Schönberg," she began again; "the whole town is talking about it; the Hochleitner woman is no companion for Miss May—a creature who—no, I can't speak of such things. Her Highness's mistress of the plate saw her with her own eyes at the castle, long after the theatre was closed. But I have not said anything because it would look spiteful, as though—but it's all the same to me now, because I go to another place in Berlin on the first of January. I have been at the head forester's for three years,

and I have grown fond of the place and of the children, and I hate to hear what people are saying. As my friend, Mrs. Secretary Busse—she lives in the same house where the Hochleitner woman lodges, and can see every one who comes and goes, the duke's lackeys with huge bouquets, the people belonging to the company, and so on—said to me, 'What in Heaven's name, Miss Stübken, is Aenne May doing, going to Jeannette Hochleitner's every day?' I stared at her with open eyes and mouth, for I wouldn't believe it, and—then I saw her myself! I had stopped in at Mrs. Busse's with the children for a moment on our way home from our walk, for she is so fond of them. I was sitting in the window with a cup of coffee, when I saw a young girl approaching. She wore a thick veil, but who could help recognizing Aenne May? Who else in Breitenfels has such a figure? And, besides, there was the martin trimming that the head forester had had sewn on her jacket. Before long we heard the sound of a piano and singing. They were enjoying themselves, too, for we could hear them laughing every other minute, and—you must confess, Mrs. Schönberg, it is in the highest degree improper."

They had reached the castle square. The little old lady drew herself up with such dignity at these last words that the housekeeper broke off in dismay.

"Aenne never does anything improper. And as for your insinuations about Miss Hochleitner, I advise you to be more careful in what you say. Good-evening, Miss Stübken!"

And wrapping her cloak more closely about her, Aunt Emilie left the housekeeper standing petrified with astonishment, and walked toward home, outwardly triumphant, inwardly more disheartened than ever.

She did not enter the house, however, but turned at the door and walked slowly back toward the town. She must know whether what she had heard was true.

CHAPTER XII.

AENNE had gone out as usual, that day, immediately after dinner; she had not heeded her mother's request that she should remain at home—indeed, she had scarcely heard it. Even if she had, she would have gone, for she needed these quiet hours in order to come to an understanding with herself and to prepare herself for what had gradually been shaping itself in her mind. She realized that she must be wholly incomprehensible to her family during this terrible period in which she was the sport of the emotions at war within her. And she wondered that Günther and her parents had so much patience with her. Günther, indeed, often looked at her questioningly and uneasily, but had never uttered a cross or doubting word. He did not understand her and he did not seek to. They saw each other but seldom; his duties occupied his entire time.

She had abandoned the idea of asking him if he would still wish to marry her even if she did not love him; she meant simply to ask him for her freedom,—unconditional freedom. Since she had heard Miss Hochleitner's story, and had had a glimpse into the free and busy life of the artist, she, too, had longed for freedom, for independence. And from the day on which she followed the singer into her

little apartment and had sung for her and had received sincere and enthusiastic praise, she had been dominated by the desire to study music. She spoke to no one of what was passing in her mind, not even to Miss Hochleitner ; the laughing, open-hearted girl had become a reserved, defiant woman.

She would constantly lead Miss Hochleitner to talk of her art, her profession, and the independence she had gained thereby, and the girl's eyes would brighten, as the eyes of one dying of thirst at the sight of water, whenever the singer concluded her praise of Aenne's voice by saying,—

“ And you, with such a voice, such a personality, are going to bury yourself in Breitenfels and marry a widower with three children ! Wasn't there any one to say to you, when you were about to bind yourself, ‘ Stop and think, you poor child ; remember it is for always ! You can never free yourself of such fetters—and if you do, you will have lost a good share of your youth and freshness, together with all your happy illusions.’ ”

Aenne would always reply,—

“ I did it of my own free will.”

But every night the girl went to bed with the thought : “ To-morrow I will write to him ! ” She would lie awake, turning over in her mind the gentlest possible form in which she could frame her refusal, and every night she fought in advance the bitter, inevitable struggle she must go through with her parents. And every time that she succeeded in arguing herself into a calmer state, she would be confronted by the question : “ What will Heinz

Kerkow say when he hears that I have broken my engagement? 'She cannot forget me,' he will say; 'she cannot bring herself to marry another man!'

Then she would start up, her heart throbbing, great drops of perspiration upon her forehead. Ah, yes, he must know that her betrothal had been an act of despair, which she lacked the strength to carry out to the end. But let him think what he pleased; he should not see her after she had regained her freedom! She would continue to endure the miserable life she was now leading until he was given leave of absence for his wedding journey. With him far away from her, she would find more courage for what she had to do.

In her rebellious misery she thought only of her own suffering, and had no thought of the man who was counting the days until she would enter his house as his wife. Day after day she sat with contracted brows, working upon her wedding outfit and listening in gloomy silence to her mother when she spoke of Günther's impatience for the duke's departure. Raillery brought her to tears, and reproaches drove her to open rebellion; she felt that she was unbearable, and the estranged faces of those about her stung her to nervous exasperation. Her only happy moments were spent at the piano with Miss Hochleitner.

She had fairly fled from the house this afternoon, to escape from the talk that revolved wholly about the marriage of Miss von Ribbeneck and the court-marshal. It was to take place within a week, and the entire town talked of nothing else; every shop

keeper, every seamstress, every caller that came to the Mays' house, was eloquent on the subject. Aenne had to hear the length of the bride's train and the color that the bridesmaids had chosen for their gowns. Every one seemed to have conspired to torture her.

Flushed with her rapid walk, she entered the singer's little drawing-room. Miss Hochleitner was seated by the window, working on an old German costume which she was to wear as Marguerite in Gounod's "Faust."

"Ah," she cried gayly, "I am so glad you have come, Miss May! The coffee will be ready in a moment, and I shall be done with this gown directly. Here is the music ; it came early this morning ; and here is the hymn that her Highness has commanded me to sing at Von Kerkow's wedding. Will you be so good as to try it, while I finish this? I should like to hear it, and I promise that if you read it off at sight nicely, I will grace your wedding with my voice, so that you will think that an angel has come down expressly from heaven."

Aenne smiled sadly.

"Ah, you will not be here, Miss Hochleitner," she said, taking off her jacket and fur cap. "Indeed, the day isn't fixed yet."

"You have a wonderfully patient bridegroom, little one! I believe I should be angry with him, in your place. But you don't seem in a hurry yourself. I'm in a hurry, though, for my coffee. Please pour it out, and I'll have this work done in a moment."

It was very cosy in the little room fragrant with the scent of lilies of the valley. The commonplace furnishings were hidden by all sorts of pretty trifles; the piano stood open, some music had fallen to the floor, and no one had bothered to pick it up. On the faded carpet lay Azorl, a handsome and much-spoiled Spitz, chewing one of his mistress's slippers.

Aenne poured the coffee from the shining silver urn, and then sat silently watching her teacher's nimble fingers.

"Well?" said the latter, looking up in surprise at the girl's silence. "Why, how you look! You are growing paler and more depressed every day. What does it mean? Do you know, I have sometimes thought——" she stopped and then concluded, "that you are dreading the future, you poor child!"

Aenne looked at her sadly.

"I know it is a solemn step," added the singer.

Aenne pressed her lips together and kept back the rising tears, but she shook her head in a vehement denial.

"Isn't that the trouble? I almost thought it was. But it isn't possible, and if it were, you would have ended it long ago, and not have trifled with a good man's affections. You are not a coward, Miss Aenne, and there is no crime in admitting a mistake—I see I was wrong; it is something else, and I would be the last to press you. Come, we will sing Von Kerkow's wedding music."

"I cannot!" the girl burst out.

The singer, who had already seated herself at the piano, turned suddenly with a look of amazement.

"You cannot sing the hymn, or you cannot sing at all?"

"I cannot sing at all to-day," she answered, controlling herself. "I have a headache."

"Well, then, we'll talk a little," said Miss Hochleitner, soothingly. "What can I do to amuse you? Shall I sing to you, or shall I tell you how every one has gone mad about the coming wedding, and that Von Kerkow's sister has arrived, a poor, colorless creature in black crape, who looks as though she hadn't a thing to hope for on earth? I must say that if I were in Miss Ribbeneck's place I should not have insisted upon such a grand wedding, but she cannot help it, I suppose; she must show all the world that she has succeeded in capturing a husband at last, after so many unsuccessful attempts, and the poor young man must take off the crape band from his arm for a few days and put it in his pocket. How those two ever came together would be a mystery to me, if I did not know——"

She broke off and poured Aenne out another cup of coffee.

"There is the sugar, Miss May; help yourself."

Aenne obeyed mechanically, and then fixed her eyes listlessly on a picture on the wall. It had grown dusk, and the pictures in the room were indistinct. The singer had taken the Spitz on her lap and was stroking its white coat meditatively.

Neither was aware that a firm step was ascending the stairs and crossing the hall, Azorl started up when a heavy knock came at the door, and, jumping to the floor, began to bark furiously. Miss Hoch-

leitner hurried to the door and called into the darkness,—

“Who is there?”

“Forgive me, Miss Hochleitner; it is the head forester, Günther. I came for Miss May. Is she still here?”

“Ah, how gallant! Come in, I beg of you. Miss May, here is Mr. Günther,” she called to Aenne, who had remained sitting in her chair, but had recognized her lover’s stalwart figure in spite of the darkness.

“Good-evening, Aenne,” he said. “I met Aunt Emilie on the street just now; she was coming here to get you, and I asked her to relinquish the mission to me—I hope I did right?”

She rose slowly.

“Yes,” she answered in a voice that was scarcely audible.

The singer had lighted the lamp, and Günther’s eyes met Aenne’s.

“How pale she looks!” he thought. “She is not pleased at my having discovered her little secret.”

As for Aenne, she was conscious of nothing but her terrible guilt toward this man.

“But won’t you sit down for a moment?” begged Miss Jeanette. “Are you in such a great hurry, Mr. Günther? Let me offer you a glass of liqueur, will you not? Sit down, do!”

She brought out a costly liqueur case, opened it, and pointed to the bottles.

“Benedictine? Chartreuse? Crème de Cacao? Anisette? Which will you have?” she cried gayly.

“Aenne, won’t you——”

The head forester's glance travelled slowly from the singer in her house-gown of red plush to Aenne. She had not sat down again, and was standing behind her chair in her black woollen dress, that was relieved only by a white linen collar. There was a look of pain about her mouth, the color was coming and going in her cheeks. He drained the tiny glass that was handed to him.

"Your health, miss!" he said. "But you must not be offended if we take our leave at once; I have something of importance to consult my betrothed about—in regard to our wedding; the duke leaves on the thirtieth of December. I have just learned it from his Highness himself."

"So there's a prospect at last of our getting back to the city!" cried the singer, clapping her hands. "Thank Heaven, we are to be released from this tiresome place! How delighted mamma will be! My only regret is on her account"—she pointed to Aenne, who was gazing with wide, anxious eyes at the head forester—"she is gold, pure gold, and she has a voice—I always thought that her lover knew what he was about; he not only shoots stags, but he captures nightingales."

Aenne turned away hastily and put on her wraps. As she held out her hand to the singer, she looked like one resolved upon some desperate step.

"Good-night," she said hoarsely, and walked to the door, past Günther, leaving him for a few moments a victim to the singer's torrent of words. At the front gate she waited for him.

It was quite dark now, but the snow made a bluish

light in the street, causing the lighted windows of the dwellings to appear a reddish-yellow by contrast. A great peace lay upon the snowy world.

At last Günther appeared in the doorway and descended the steps; Aenne saw that he still wore his hunting dress. He could have only stopped to leave his rifle at home before bringing her the news; then he had met Aunt Emilie; but how did she know of her visit to Miss Hochleitner?

"Come, Aenne, let us go around by Forest Street," he pleaded.

She assented; they walked on in silence side by side, he in the street, she on the narrow sidewalk. When they had left the last houses behind them and began to ascend the forest path which here led to the castle along the outskirts of the town, he made an embarrassed motion as though to draw her arm within his; but she moved aside, her eyes down-cast.

"Aenne," he said at last, and notwithstanding the perfect stillness his voice was indistinct with emotion, "Aenne, are you not a little glad? Are you still afraid of me? Am I still such a stranger to you? I know things haven't been as they ought to be during our engagement; I have had so little time, and, too, I thought that I would not force myself upon you; have I, Aenne?"

"No," she murmured, "but——"

"But?"

There was alarm in the repetition.

"I have something to say to you," she began desperately, and stood still.

They were just under a giant oak which stretched out its gnarled, snow-covered branches into the air like threatening arms.

"You still have something to say? Now?" he asked, slowly.

Her slight figure swayed. He put out his arm and drew her to him, so that she leaned against his breast.

"Now speak," he said.

"Not like this! Not like this!" she faltered, and a heavy sob rendered the words almost unintelligible. "Let me go—let me go! I cannot deceive you any longer—I cannot!"

"Deceive—you—Aenne!"

She had released herself, and was standing before him with bowed head, her hands clasped tightly together.

"Forgive me," she said, heavily. "I thought I could do it, but—I cannot. I feel it—I have felt it for a long time—but—I——"

"You cannot do what? You cannot marry me?"

She nodded.

"Yes," she said, her face white and distorted. "Yes."

"Aenne! And you have felt it for a long time?"

He had stepped back and unconsciously taken off his hat, and passed his hand over his forehead.

"I have always felt it," she went on, "from the very first. But I wanted to—because—but it doesn't matter. I do not want to any longer. If you insist upon it, I will—but you will have to suffer what will follow. You can force me to go on with it, but do

not—do not—I implore you? It would be terrible! It——”

She sank upon her knees; her strength had failed her. He stooped and raised her in his arms.

“Why do you threaten me?” he asked, gently. “What do you think of me? Have you forgotten what I once said to you?”

Not far from the oak under which they had been standing was a rustic seat; he carried her to it and took her on his knee, and held her head close to his heart.

“Now tell me everything,” he pleaded. “You can trust me. I have watched you grow up, and I am surely not a stranger to you.”

“Don’t be so kind to me!” she cried. “I cannot do what you wish—set me free—let me go”

You are free, Aenne,” he said, letting his arms fall; “and if you will not confide in me, I will accept my fate unquestioningly. Come, let us go.”

But she could not rise. She had broken into wild sobbing at the man’s hopeless words.

“Forgive me! Forgive me! forgive me!” she repeated in a paroxysm of remorse and despair. “Do not question me. I am so wicked, so wicked!”

“No, Aenne, you are not wicked; you do not love me, that is all. Perhaps you thought you loved me when you said ‘yes’ in answer to my pleading, and you were mistaken. You are so young still, and I reproach myself for having sought you. Do not cry, my poor child; you are not wicked.”

Her sobs ceased. Her head lay upon his shoulder, and, as he stroked her hair, a delicious sense of rest

after all her pain stole over her. A feeling of implicit trust in this noble, unselfish man whom she had so sorely wronged melted her pride, her coldness, her reserve. She felt impelled to tell him everything, to unburden her heart to him.

"I will tell you all," she whispered in his ear. "I was rebellious. I was heartsick—I loved him so dearly; and when he chose the other, I wanted to show him that——"

She stopped; she felt herself suddenly set upon her feet, seized by the shoulders and shaken by furious hands.

"You trifled with me—with me? You! You!" he cried.

Then he let her go so suddenly that she staggered and fell upon her knees and remained gazing up at him, terror-stricken.

He had sunk back upon the bench and sat with clenched hands, staring at the ground. At last he got upon his feet and picked up his hat from the snow.

"Come," he said, with an effort. "You cannot stay here."

"Hermann!" she moaned, and dragged herself toward him on her knees. "I didn't mean that! I never thought of that!"

"Stand up!" he interrupted. "I am grateful to you that, at the last moment, you found the courage to tell me, the courage of despair!" He helped her to rise. "You make the parting easy for me. Come, your parents will be anxious about you."

"My parents!" she faltered. "My mother!"

"You are afraid to go to them with this confession?" he asked, bitterly, without looking at her. "Well—I will relieve you of the necessity. Don't be afraid; I will not say anything about—the other. I will tell them that after thinking the matter over thoroughly, it has seemed best to us both to part. They will have to be satisfied with that."

They had reached the castle square after a rapid walk, and the sight of the lighted windows of her home made Aenne realize with a shudder the enormity of her conduct toward this man. She stopped and raised her hands to him in supplication; he passed by her as though he had not seen her gesture.

"Cannot you forgive me?" she cried, clutching at his coat sleeve with convulsive fingers. "You do not know what I have suffered."

He hesitated for an instant, then his sleeve slipped from her grasp. He went up the steps, opened the front door, and stood aside to let her pass.

"Good-bye, Aenne," he said, gravely, as she hurried past him, scarcely knowing how she got across the hall and up the stairs.

When the mother looked out of her husband's study, to find out who had come in, she saw in the dim light of the hall lamp only the head forester, who was standing motionless, gazing up the stairs.

"Is that you, Günther? Didn't you see Aenne?" she exclaimed. "Good heavens, nothing has happened to her, has there?"

He turned and removed his hat with a weary gesture.

"I have seen her and talked with her," he said. "She has just gone upstairs—I would like to speak with you, Mrs. May, and with your husband."

She was silent, startled by his looks and by his voice, and signed to him to enter.

"May," she called into the room, "Günther has something to say to us."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE following day, Aenne's home looked as though it were a house of mourning. Mrs. May went about with tearful but wrathful eyes. A broken engagement was to her something dishonorable, shameful, something that had never happened in an honest family in Breitenfels within her remembrance; Aenne would be disgraced all her life long.

When the head forester had told the parents briefly that Aenne and he had decided to part, the mother had refused to believe him, and had insisted that Aenne was only frightened and that she would ask his forgiveness without delay. She began to tell with desperate volubility how shortly before her own marriage she had been almost on the point of dismissing her husband so terrified had she been at the idea of the first step. He must be patient; he could not have understood Aenne aright.

"Isn't it so, May?" she had appealed to her husband after each sentence, and gasped for breath like a drowning person.

But the head forester had taken her hand, thanked her for her motherly intentions, shaken hands with the doctor, and turned to go without further words. The room was very quiet when he had gone.

"Cheer up, old lady!" said the doctor, patting

his wife on the shoulder. "Who knows what might have happened? I never quite liked the engagement. Aenne was probably over hasty, and she and Günther must settle it between them. We will help her to bear it."

"But think of all the scandal and all the talk!" cried his wife; and hurrying from the room, she went upstairs to her daughter.

The fire in the stove had long since gone out, and the girl was sitting in the cold, in a state of mental and physical exhaustion. The mother burst into the room with such violence that, in the darkness, she overturned a little stand that held Aenne's carefully preserved treasures, sending the dainty trifles crashing to the floor, where she pushed them aside angrily with her foot.

"I would like to ask," she began, groping for the matches with trembling fingers and striking a light, "whether you are in possession of your senses. You are to sit down this instant and beg Günther's forgiveness—by letter! A fine thing to break off with a man three weeks before the wedding! Even a servant-girl would not think of doing such a thing—and you, my daughter, last of all! You are to be downstairs in five minutes and you are to write—do you understand?"

But her attempt at intimidation failed utterly. Aenne's spirit of reckless defiance rose in arms.

"No," she answered, shortly, "you have no right to force me."

"No right?" gasped the mother. "Let me tell you, you ungrateful, unnatural child, that if I have

no rights, neither have I any duties towards you; do you understand?"

The angry woman laid her hand on her daughter's shoulder and grasped it with a grip of iron.

"I tell you, that if you persist in estranging Günther and in losing so good a chance you will have to see how you can get on without your mother! All will be at an end between us. Bear that in mind!"

"Yes, I understand—I will go."

"To Günther?"

"Never! I cannot."

Aenne had risen, snatched up a shawl from a chair, and turned toward the door.

"Where then?"

"It does not matter—only away from here!"

The mother placed herself with extended arms before the door. She was alarmed at the girl's determined air, and, abandoning her threatening tone, broke into tearful lamentations.

"So this is the reward for all my love and care for nineteen years, to have you rush from your home like a mad creature because things don't go exactly to suit you, because I advise you for your own good, because I urge you to fulfil the duties you have taken upon yourself of your own free will! Do you think one can trifle safely with such sacred promises? Have your own way if you will, but you will not go unpunished! And when you are a sour, neglected old maid with no proper duties, no real interests to fill your life, you will regret this step. And if you do not regret it before, you surely will when your father and I are dead, and you are left alone and forgot-

ten; then you will say to yourself, 'Oh, if I had only—if I had only——'

"Why, my dear sister," interrupted a gentle voice, "how can you? Surely, it is better for her to step back now, rather than to make herself and him unhappy." Aunt Emilie had entered, and her kind, troubled eyes sought the girl, who was still standing by the door, her shawl about her, gazing at her mother.

"I might have known you would come," muttered Mrs. May.

The girl unresistingly allowed the old lady to take her in her arms and whisper words of comfort in her ear. The mother, however, left the room. She had lost the battle; she must now beat as honorable a retreat as possible. And after she had cried herself out on her husband's shoulder, she betook herself with forced composure to the kitchen and told the wondering maid that Miss Aenne's wedding was postponed for the present—reason she gave none. She then proceeded to the sewing-room and dismissed Miss Scheurig, the seamstress, saying that she would let her know after Christmas when she would be wanted again. She was busy until late into the night, putting away in chests and cupboards every vestige of Aenne's wedding outfit. Fortunately she had not yet bought the silk dresses for Aenne and herself. She collected from the best room the few wedding gifts, the photographs of Günther and the children, and put them by. Last of all, she sat herself down to acquaint her sons with the doleful news.

"If we only knew why she has refused to marry him," she wrote. "Father and I are wholly in the dark. She says 'I cannot,' and that is all. Father has spoiled her too much, and Aunt Emilie, too, with her sentimental nonsense. So you will find a very depressed household when you come home. I feel it keenly, and so does papa, but he will not let any one see it."

The house, indeed, seemed like a house of mourning. The whirring of the machine was stilled; the head forester's children, who were in the habit of running over early every day to bid Grandmamma May "Good-morning," remained away, and the Christmas cakes remained upon the coffee-table.

Anne lay stretched upon her bed, feverish and exhausted. Her father came upstairs to see her, and at the sight of the sweet, childish face so altered, he stroked her cheek tenderly.

"Child, child, what does all this mean?" he said. "What were you thinking of when you said 'yes,' to Günther?"

A hot flush leapt into her face for an instant, but she remained silent.

"And what reason am I to give her Highness?" he asked.

"I do not know, papa."

He left the room, shaking his head.

"Try to compose yourself a little, and get up if you can," he called back. "Mother will say nothing more to you—she is resigned."

Anne made her appearance downstairs at dinner; Aunt Emilie covertly pressed her hand under

the table. The doctor seemed preoccupied; the mother's violence had given place to an air of resignation.

"And her Highness," she asked, breaking the silence at last, as she carved the beef, "what did her Highness have to say?"

"She was very sympathetic and kind, as she always is," answered the doctor. "She said she had always wondered at the engagement, that it must be a very trying time for Aenne, and asked if we were not going to send her away to travel for a while."

"Travel!" repeated the doctor's wife, the tears starting to her eyes.

"Yes. I said to her: 'Your Highness, my circumstances will not permit of my letting my daughter travel. Your Highness must remember that I have two sons. She will have to get over it here.' Her Highness replied that it was most unfortunate that Günther lived so near, but that the duke would scarcely remove him; she said, in conclusion, that she hoped Aenne would make another choice and the right one. As I said, she was kind as always. It was a relief to me to speak out, but it disturbed me somewhat to have Miss Ribbeneck sitting by."

Aenne started slightly. If Toni von Ribbeneck knew of it, then he, too, must know, and what would follow? She laid down her knife and fork; she could force down nothing.

In the afternoon, Mrs. Meyer, the wife of the farmer of the crown lands, who was known and dreaded as a gossip throughout the town, dropped

in quite by accident. The doctor's wife grew pale when the maid announced the caller.

"Did you tell her I was at home?" she demanded.

"Yes, Mrs. May; should I have said no?"

Mrs. May rose with a groan from her arm-chair back of the stove, where she had been resting her aching head.

"It will be all out now," she said to Aunt Emilie. "She'll give me no peace until she finds out everything; if I could only escape her! I shall never survive this!" And with this reiterated prophecy she betook herself to the best room.

The wife of the court chaplain and Mrs. Kruse, a merchant's wife, followed each other shortly, as the maid informed Aenne and Aunt Emilie.

"Oh, dear!" exclaimed the latter. "I wish your mother would be a little more calm! She will make herself ill."

"I am very, very sorry," said Aenne, "but I cannot do otherwise, auntie."

The old lady sighed, and silence ensued. An hour later, they heard the door close, and the visitors leave the house. Then came the sound of rapid footsteps, and Mrs. May flung open the door. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes were bright with tears.

"If I don't have a stroke of apoplexy, it'll be a marvel," she said, gasping for breath. "Oh, my! oh, my!"

She pushed a stool aside with her foot and aimlessly tied an apron about her waist, only to take it off again immediately.

"Do you know what they are saying in the town?" she asked, coming to a halt before Aenne.

"No, mamma, I do not care."

"Indeed? But I do, when people say that you had set your heart on Heinz von Kerkow, and accepted Günther in a fit of pique!"

Aenne started up; the color had vanished from her face.

"Who says that?" she demanded. "Who says that?"

"Who? Yes, who! That stirs you up, does it? Well, then, stop the gossiping tongues!"

Aenne sank into her chair again and said no more.

"I spoke my mind to them," the mother went on. "It seems that a little bird told you that all was not as it should be between the couple at the castle, and so that is why you broke off with Günther, they say——"

She pressed her hands to her temples, and gave the unfortunate stool such a shove that it went flying half across the room.

Aenne rose and went out in silence. She had heard nothing of these rumors; no one had ever intimated such a thing to her; but that her secret should be even guessed at, burned into her very soul. Fifteen minutes later, she was knocking at Miss Hochleitner's door; she, too, of course knew of the broken engagement.

"Gracious Heaven!" she exclaimed at the sight of her friend's blanched face. "Is it true then?"

Aenne held out her hand—the gold band was missing.

"Do not question me," she implored. "I cannot talk about it."

"Of course I won't, my dear. Only tell me, is your heart any lighter?"

"Ah, dear friend!" pleaded Aenne.

"And what are you going to do, if you do not marry?"

"I mean to study—to go to Berlin or Dresden, to some school of music."

"And are your parents in sympathy with you?"

Aenne's head sank.

"I do not know; I have not spoken to them yet—I am so tired after all that happened yesterday—and it will be easier when my brothers have gone away after Christmas; they would not understand me, and Christmas should be a time of peace."

"You think that your parents will not fall in with your wishes?"

"Yes. But, dear Miss Hochleitner, I came to ask a favor of you."

"Speak out, you poor dear—how white you look!—I will grant it, if it is in my power."

"Will you let me sing the wedding music to you?"

"Is that all? I supposed it was something very important. Stand over there—it's in four sharps. I'll play the prelude for the organ, twenty-one measures—so——"

She seated herself at the piano and began to play. Aenne sang in a muffled voice, as though the tears were rising in her throat.

"Do you think I might venture to sing it before an audience?" she asked, when she had finished.

"Why not, if you feel disposed to? You know, to be impressive, it must sound like the ringing of bells and angels' voices."

"Of course! But if I were to try very hard?"

"Yes, you could sing it, certainly."

"Then now comes my request, Miss Hochleitner."

"Well?"

"You see," began Aenne, "I want my parents and brothers to hear me sing in public before I propose what I have in mind, and I should not have another such opportunity in an age. I want to ask you to grow very hoarse before Miss Ribbeneck's wedding, and to let me sing in your stead."

Miss Hochleitner turned about on her music-stool and stared at the girl before her with undisguised amazement.

"I don't understand you" she said in broad Viennese. "You want to sing at Von Kerkow's wedding?" Then she began to laugh. "Oh, you sly-boots, I wouldn't have believed it of you! How cleverly you have thought it all out! But there's no harm in it, and I will help you. At a quarter before three on the great day, punctually on the minute, I shall grow hoarse, and half an hour later you shall sing—that is, if anything comes of the affair, which I very much doubt."

"What do you mean?" asked Aenne.

"Haven't you heard? Every chambermaid at the castle knows about it. There has been a bad falling out between the pair; the duchess herself had

to put in a word in order to restore peace. They say it was about that poor thing, his sister; I believe he wanted her to have a home with him. But the bride, odious little creature! wouldn't hear of it, and fell into a passion and declared that he must choose between his sister and her, and——"

"And?" repeated Aenne.

"She got her own way. Men are always setting themselves up as masters, and yet they are always giving in."

"He must love her very much," said Aenne dully.

The singer laughed.

"Love her?" she cried. "Love her? You little innocent! You mustn't be angry with me—I have got to laugh; you know you don't believe it yourself. Well, so you want to sing the wedding song to him? That's right! But go through with it bravely, or it will do you more harm than good."

Aenne asked nothing more. When she reached home, she seated herself at the window and gazed up at the castle as though she could see through the walls straight into Heinz Kerkow's heart. Could it be true? Could it be true that he was unhappy already? she asked herself over and over again. Why had he not had the courage she had had, and broken his bonds? Or was it through very courage that he held to what was done?

Perhaps she had been the coward. Yes, she had shrunk from the suffering that lay before her. Günther himself had pointed it out to her—there was no happiness without love.

"No happiness!" she murmured as though warn-

ing him, as she looked up towards the light in his room. "And I am going to show that I am not a coward, but that I mean to take my fate into my own hands. I will be of some use in the world; I will be happy in it, but without restraint; I will be free. I will have the right to sorrow for a lost love without turning the sorrow into sin—I will live!"

10

CHAPTER XIV.

MADAM VON GRUBER was still prostrated by the excitement of the last two weeks. Not alone had she been exhausted by the preparation of the wedding outfit in addition to her duties towards the duchess, which occupied her more fully than ever, but she had had to see the dreadful day come that had shattered all her cherished hopes for Heinz and for his sister. The star of prosperity seemed destined never to rise over the house of Kerkow. If she could only have given expression to her feelings! But there was no discussing anything with Heinz; it was his imperative wish that Hede should be told nothing, and if his wishes were not respected, unpleasant scenes were sure to follow; and Madam Gruber had a horror of scenes.

She sighed, rang the bell, and told the servant to bring her ink and paper; then, propping herself up on the couch, she began to write to her most intimate friend, a Madam von Schlieben, who lived in her luxurious castle in Silesia, and had no other anxieties than those caused by her grandchildren's little illnesses.

“DEAR CLEMENTINE :—I am about to unburden my heart to you again. If a shadow should fall across

your sunny path, it is only one that does not affect you directly, and may even make life a little more interesting to you, because you can measure your own good fortune by the troubles of others.

"I have already written you a full account of Heinz von Kerkow's engagement to Toni Ribbeneck, who inherited a nice little fortune from her uncle, Dietz Ribbeneck, who used to live in Karlitzke in Pomerania, and of the boy's appointment to the pocket-edition post of court-marshal to our pocket-edition of a court. There was no love on his side, but in the position in which he was placed, Toni was the straw at which he had to clutch. You already know the struggles I underwent before I succeeded in bringing about the engagement and the court-marshalship.

"What has happened now? If you were to read it in a book, you would exclaim; 'Improbable! Impossible!' And yet all that follows is the absolute truth. My nephew has entered upon his new duties, the wedding day has been set, her Highness has generously granted a month's leave for the wedding journey, I, of course, offered myself as substitute for Toni, and the wedding is to be the third day after Christmas, that is, in a week. Now what happened four days ago? Hede Kerkow, Heinz's younger sister, was to arrive that evening; he had insisted on her being present, and as he and Toni were to leave Breitenfels on their wedding day, he asked Hede to come beforehand, so that they might be together awhile. Her Highness had graciously consented to her remaining here as a guest. I had

already noticed that Toni was very non-committal whenever Heinz's relations were mentioned; between ourselves she is by no means amiable.

"At noon on that day, Heinz and Toni met in my saloon as usual. I could see by Heinz's face that something had happened, for he was pale and his usual composure had deserted him. I supposed that he had had some trouble with the officials, such as arises every day, and it is not easy for an officer to accustom himself all at once to the management of a household; but in reply to my questions he answered only,—

"‘I have had two unpleasant pieces of news, one from the doctor, concerning the state of Hede's health. The other I must speak to Toni about later—alone.’

"Toni has a remarkable faculty for not hearing unpleasant things. She began to talk at once about the carpet her Highness had given her, a real Smyrna. Heinz returned to the doctor's letter, and sitting down beside Toni said very kindly,—

"‘I am worried about Hede, Toni; I cannot leave her any longer to such a lonely and wretched existence. She is wearing herself out with her painting lessons; she gets only seventy-five pfennigs an hour; she is killing herself in order to earn her daily bread.’

"Toni changed from white to crimson, and answered, rolling the ribbons of her belt between her fingers,—

"‘You can send her an allowance every month.’

"‘That is not enough,’ he answered still quietly.

‘She must have better food: she cannot keep a maid, and she has no time to prepare her meals.’

“‘Why doesn’t she eat at a hotel?’”

“‘I see that you will not consent,’ he said, ‘but I cannot waive the point. I must insist that she remain with us for a year at least. She is the only one of my family left to me, for my other sister——,’

“‘But why must she come just now?’ she broke out.

“‘Because it is a case of necessity,’ he answered.

“‘I was about to interpose, for I saw that a storm was brewing, when Toni said,—

“‘Do not be vexed, Heinz, but the idea of having a third person the first year of our married life is exceedingly distasteful to me. I beg you not to press it. I will make her an allowance large enough for her to keep a servant and to live where and how she pleases, but——’

“‘He gave her a look, Clementine, that made my heart stand still—so angry, so contemptuous, was it.

“‘I regret to have to insist upon my request,’ he said coldly; ‘food is not the only thing she needs; she must have kindness, affection, a change of air and surroundings. She has no one but me, and——’

“‘I insist upon my own wishes!’ she cried. ‘I am marrying you and not your family. If your sister is more to you than I am—you have only to choose between her and me.’

“‘There was silence for a while. I was nearly fainting, of course. I tried to find something suit-

able to say, but, although I do not lose my self-possession easily, I could think of nothing, and when I was about to open my lips at last, Heinz was before me.

“‘If it is a question of choice, I take you, of course,’ he said ; but his tone was so scornful, and his words were spoken with such a quivering face and accompanied by so deep a bow, that when he had gone we two remained standing where he had left us, staring blankly at each other.

“‘She cried and made a great scene, said he did not love her, and worked herself into a perfect paroxysm of injured virtue and innocence. Shortly after a footman brought me a letter from Heinz, and on opening it, I found a large envelope addressed to him, together with a card his handwriting.

“‘DEAR AUNT,’ he wrote, ‘I received the accompanying letter early this morning, and wished to break its contents to my future wife as gently as possible. Will you tell her its import in such a way as to alarm her as little as you can? I am not in a condition, after what has passed to inform her with the necessary calmness.’

“I read the inclosure, and could not suppress a cry of dismay ; Toni recognized the handwriting as that of her uncle, her mother’s brother, to whom she had intrusted the management of her property. As soon as she had read the contents, she fell to crying and shrieking. Think of it, Clementine, the old idiot—I beg your pardon—had invested the entire

fortune in stocks, and on November nineteen, at the time of the great crash, everything, everything was lost!

"The unhappy boy!

"There is nothing to be done, and under the circumstances, retreat is impossible. I am convinced that had he not already received that fatal letter when Toni gave him the choice between herself and his sister, he would have been mad enough to answer, 'My sister.' So the affair ended in a passionate apology on her side and silent acquiescence on his. He has not referred to the loss of the fortune by so much as a word, but he goes about with an anxious face. You can understand what marriage with a penniless girl means to him.

"To be sure, she offered him his freedom as a matter of form, but of course he would not accept it. The duke, who had learned the whole story from the dowager duchess, summoned him to his study that same day, after the hunt-dinner.

"'My dear Kerkow,' he said, 'I cannot release you from your duty toward your chosen wife, but I can free you from the debts you have taken upon yourself. Make me out a list of them—it will be my wedding gift to you.'

"His Highness certainly appreciates the poor boy's position. He has, therefore, been relieved of one anxiety. For the rest, they must live upon her salary as lady-in-waiting and his as court-marshal. Of the splendid fortune of one hundred and eighty thousand thalers, scarcely ten thousand have been saved.

"Hede von Kerkow has arrived, and Toni and she avoid each other as much as possible. Hede watches her brother and me with great questioning, anxious eyes; she prefers to sit alone in her room for the most part. Toni has somewhat recovered from the loss of her fortune, and has made little or no retrenchment in her expenditures. The little left to her will soon be squandered. My poor boy! And how will it be when the duchess dies? The pensions that the two will receive are scarcely worth speaking of, and her Highness has failed perceptibly since autumn.

"Nothing but trouble, you see Clementine!

"I hope to see you in the summer; my one pleasure now in life is to talk of the happy days that are past. I shall see Countess Arostein at the entertainment the night before the wedding, the expenses of which the duchess bears as well as those of the wedding itself. We shall talk about you. Not one of the countess's six daughters is engaged, yet, and they are none of them as young as they might be.

"Farewell. Greetings to your children.

"Always your faithful

"CHRISTIANE VON GRUBER."

CHAPTER XV.

A WEEK had elapsed since Madam von Gruber had written to her friend in Silesia concerning the disappointment that had come to her nephew in regard to his wife's fortune. Hede Kerkow had told her brother and aunt that she could not be present at the merry-making on the wedding eve.

"I do not feel like meeting so many people," she had said when they had remonstrated with her, "it will be an effort for me even to appear at the wedding dinner. Do not urge me, please, please! My only wish in coming was to be with Heinz when he was married."

On the afternoon of the day before the wedding, she knocked at the door of her brother's room; she wanted to see him once more before she gave him up forever. No changes had been made in his rooms as yet; the army of workmen was not to take possession of them until after the young couple's departure, when they were to be wholly transformed under Madam von Gruber's supervision. Toni's wishes in regard to the alterations had not been modified; indeed, everything had already been ordered.

Heinz Kerkow was sitting thoughtfully in the recess of one of the windows; the snow was whirl-

ing without. So thickly did the flakes fall that nothing could be seen of the little town and the broad landscape, and one could scarcely distinguish even the houses that lined the castle square.

"Heinz dear," she said affectionately, as she entered the room in response to his "Come in!" "don't be vexed with me for coming to you once more before the festivities begin; I felt such a longing for you, and to-morrow you will be gone from me."

"You know you are always welcome, Hede," he answered kindly. "I am my master for a few hours. His Excellency has undertaken my duties from to-day. Toni is dressing and so is Aunt Gruber; it is the lull before the storm, dear, and, as you are not to be present this evening, we will make the most of our time now."

He had risen and given her his seat in the window and taken another opposite her.

"Isn't it pleasant here," he went on, "with the storm raging outside?"

"Very pleasant—but, Heinz, you are not vexed with me because I am not to be present to-night?"

"I fully understand your feelings, child." He had taken her hands in his, while they looked affectionately into each other's eyes. "Life is beginning for me in earnest now."

"Oh, Heinz, if you will only be happy!" she said tremulously.

"I shall be, I shall be," he said, stroking her hand reassuringly. "Have no fears for me, child; your future causes me more anxiety than my own.

We Kerkows always manage to fight our way through."

"How that sounds from a prospective bridegroom," she answered half laughing, half in tears. "Fight your way through! Do you remember how we used to play at marrying when we were children, and you married me to our neighbor's son, Willy, and made that eloquent address. 'Don't beat each other—do not bite—scratch your faces if you must. When the bad boys chase you run ahead as fast as you can.'"

He laughed.

"We were wicked little wretches, Hede, weren't we? As I remember, you and your Willy lost no time is scratching each other."

"Naturally! But then I calmly took some one else, Paul Gröber."

"Yes," he said, half in jest, half in earnest; "it was very simple and quite permissible. But if real married people bite and scratch each other, it's quite another thing, and they must go on living together notwithstanding."

"Oh, Heinz, I believe people can tell beforehand whether they are going to be happy together or not."

"H'm! I cannot be altogether sure of that," he answered. "But don't be afraid, Hede; my marriage will be admirably peaceful."

She looked at him again with the same look of painful interrogation with which she had always regarded him since she had first seen him with his bride in his new position. There had been a bitter

tone in his voice as he had answered, at once dull and sharp.

"You mean to ask whether I can guarantee it? Most assuredly, for it takes two to quarrel, and for my part, I have no intention of indulging in anything of the kind; do you understand, child?"

"Yes," she answered, "and it takes two to love, also."

"Why, how clever we are! So——"

"Heinz!" She could not control herself any longer. "Ah, Heinz, don't speak so lightly—how you have changed!" she cried. "You are not at all the bright, happy boy you used to be. I even hate this civilian dress, it doesn't suit you, and——"

"Really?" he interrupted laughingly, in order to give a less serious tone to the conversation. "And here I have been imagining myself irresistible in a dress suit. I understand your meaning, child, you cannot forgive me for having discarded my uniform. But you know I had to do it. I hadn't the means to continue in the service. But you may depend upon it that, if there should be a war, the dress suit would be thrown aside and the uniform put on."

"I would rather have struggled along as a soldier," she persisted, obstinately. "And you could have managed alone."

"You do not know what you are saying," he murmured.

She flushed scarlet.

"You were not thinking of me when you took this step, Heinz? I could not bear the thought—it would kill me!"

"I was not thinking of you only, but of our mother and our sister at Halle—do you not think of her, Hede?"

She dried her tears and pressed her lips together; he turned his head away and gazed out of the window. Below, through the flying snowflakes, could now be seen the outlines of the houses about the castle square, here the head forester's, there the Mays'; lights were already shining in many windows of the hotel, which was filled with the guests from a distance who had been invited to his wedding, families from the capital, from the neighboring estates, the Ribbeneck kinsfolk, his comrades from his old regiment.

"If I could save you," Hede suddenly broke out fiercely, "I would kill Ottilie and myself, too! What is the good of our living!"

"Good? To save me from what?" he asked, turning in alarm.

"From this marriage."

"You are mad, Hede!" he answered, his eyes flashing, the blood mounting to his forehead. "How does my choice concern you? Do you expect me to reproach you in case the marriage should turn out badly?"

"No!" she answered harshly, "you could not reproach me, because I should like to tear you from her with these two hands."

"Hede!" he cried, starting up at his sister wild words.

But the disappointment over her sister-in-law, a disappointment that had been gathering in her heart

since her first meeting with Toni, her anxiety and dread for her beloved brother's future, made her forget all other considerations. She sprang to her feet and sinking down before him, grasped him by the arm.

"Must it be?" she cried hoarsely. "Consider, Heinz, you have never been a coward—you have only to make up your mind—hundreds of engagements have been braken. The young lady down there in town, whom everybody is talking about—I have forgotten her name—had the courage; do as she did. Do not make yourself wretched, Heinz, dear Heinz—there is still time—do not think of us, go out into the world and take your happiness and your future into your own hands!"

He had raised her to her feet, placed her in a chair, and brought her a glass of water.

"Drink it!" he said sharply. "You must calm yourself; your nerves are all unstrung. If you do not learn to control them, you will go the same way as Otilie has gone. Do not look at me with such horror! If you are mad enough to advise your brother to be a scoundrel by proving false to his duty as a man of honor in order to escape a fancied misfortune—by stepping back at the eleventh hour—you cannot be wholly yourself. Collect yourself! I know that it is your love for me that causes you to make a mountain out of a molehill, and so I won't reproach you for this scene. But in future, Hede, in future, you must never say one word against my wife, or we shall have to part. Now give me your hand and be my sensible Hede—come, give me a

kiss! And if you cannot love Toni, at least do not hate her as bitterly as you do now!"

He bent over her and kissed her; but she only sat immovable and strove vainly to control her trembling limbs.

There was silence for a long time between them; Heinz stood by the window, while the big tears rolled uninterruptedly down Hede's cheeks. He was gazing down at Aenne May's home and thinking of Hede's words. She had had the courage to free herself; yes, it was possible for her, but not for him. She had simply to admit a mistake; he, however, had been the suitor; he had reached out to Toni Ribbeneck as a drowning man clutches at a straw; now that he had gained firm ground, he could not abandon her. He had thought of it three weeks before, when he had begun to appreciate more and more the barrenness of the shore which he had gained through her; he had thought that it would not be possible to live upon it. But now that she had become practically penniless, the desperate idea of retreat no longer came to him; he knew what he owed to himself and a sort of savage humor had taken possession of him.

Hede's voice sounded behind him.

"Will you forgive me, Heinz? I see that I was wrong, you cannot do otherwise; forgive me!"

He turned at once and put his arm about her.

"You silly child! What possessed you? You ought to have known me better."

"Yes, it was stupid of me."

"Well, we'll say nothing more about it," he said

soothingly. "We shall be just the same to each other as we were before; I only wish I could keep you near me."

"I wish so too, Heinz, but it cannot be."

"Don't you believe you could find a few pupils here, if you were to rent some rooms?"

She shook her head.

"And how should I live in the mean time?"

"Why, Hede, what a question! There is always a place at my table for you."

"No," she said, releasing herself from his arms and a hard look coming into her face, "no, I can take nothing from Toni, nothing."

He looked at her half seriously, half ironically.

"There will be very little from Toni, Hede; I doubt if her salary will more than pay for her gowns."

She did not understand him.

"But—her fortune?" she stammered.

"Her fortune?" He suddenly broke into one of his old hearty laughs. "It is so securely invested that she can never get at it, Hede."

Her bewildered face filled him with amusement.

"What do you mean? Toni is poor?"

"Comparatively poor. So you see, dear, you can sit at our table without any very great prickings of conscience."

"No," she answered, breathing rapidly and with difficulty. "You have a sufficient burden in Ottilie."

She sank back in her chair and stared before her. With what hopes she had journeyed away from her

misery ! She had rejoiced in the thought of love and of sunshine, of breathing another atmosphere, and now there was nothing left for her but to return to the old dreary life, to the painting lessons for a beggarly pittance, to starvation upon wretched food, to starvation for a heart in touch with her own.

"Heinz," she said, "I must go home again day after to-morrow."

"Won't you stay a little while with Aunt Gruber, Hede ? It would do you so much good."

"No, no ! It will only spoil me to remain here ; and what reason would there be for my remaining—when you are gone ?"

"But I shall not be away long. We have given up the idea of Italy—a week in Berlin, that is all !"

"No, it is better for me to go."

"You look so badly that I do not like to leave you alone even for this evening," he said reproachfully.

"Why not ? Do not be anxious about me, please ! I can read ; I——"

He glanced at the clock.

"My time is up," he said reluctantly ; his heart ached for the white-faced girl with the fixed dark eyes.

"Have you anything to read ?" he asked, going up to a table covered with books and papers, taking up several together with a copy of the Breitenfels Gazette and handing them to her. "There, Hede, there is a little of everything, down to the latest happenings in Breitenfels ; they'll probably have a

lot about the festivities to-night. And now don't indulge in any forebodings; you can count upon me, Hede, even if I am not a Croesus. And please think over whether it would not be better for you to make your home here."

She stood like one in a trance, the books and papers held tightly under her arm.

"Come," he said, "I will go with you."

They walked together down the long, carpeted corridor. Hede's room was on the same side of the castle that was occupied by the dowager duchess, only two flights higher. He entered behind his sister; the hanging lamp was lighted, the curtains were drawn, the fire blazed on the hearth.

"Is it warm enough for you?" he asked. "Your supper is ordered,—I hate to leave you so alone. Shall I come in and see you again after the thing is over?"

"Please do," she answered.

"I will knock carefully, in case you should be asleep."

"I shall be expecting you; I shall not be asleep. It is the last evening that you will belong to me," she was about to add, but refrained.

"Good-bye for the present, then, Hede; I shall see you again," he added, hastily as though to forestall any further remark. Then the door closed and Hede was alone.

She drew a chair up to the fire and settled down into its depths; she still held the books and papers tightly clasped. Thus she remained for a long time. No sound penetrated up here, indeed the castle was

as silent as though inhabited by spirits, and it was as quiet here as in her poor solitary lodgings at home. Only the ticking of the bronze clock on the mantelpiece was to be heard.

Hede broke suddenly into low, passionate sobbing; an inexpressible dread of the future had taken possession of her. Since her mother's death, Heinz had been her one hope, and now this hope was shattered. The poor boy would find it hard work to get along himself, and she felt that if she had to take up her old life again without one human being who was near to her, what Heinz had said would come true—she would end where her sister had ended.

She thought of the nights when she had sat upright in her bed, terrified by the awful loneliness and desolation. She thought of the mornings when she crept about, shivering, to prepare some tea over the alcohol lamp, and started the fire in the stove with benumbed fingers.

If only she had been accustomed to such a life! But until recently she had had a woman to help her. And then the painting lessons, with aching head in the turpentine-filled air; at noon the dinner of a few hastily prepared potatoes with an egg, at most, and then to work again, the same thing over and over again; and yet how happy she was to have work!

Then came the long evenings when from cold and exhaustion she would creep into her bed, though sleep did not come to her until early morning. She raised her thin hands to her forehead and looked about her like one just awakened from an ugly dream.

Absently she turned over the reading matter that still lay in her lap. "Breitenfels official news" were the first words that attracted her eye. She unfolded the sheet mechanically. Politics—court news—her brother's name, the names of the guests that were to be present—how imposing it all sounded! Then followed a theatrical notice: "The Barber of Seville"—last performance but one—an engagement announcement; births, deaths—wanted, a barmaid of good appearance—and finally her glance remained riveted upon the following lines,—

"A lady of refinement who will assume the management of a house and fill a mother's place towards three children, ages seven, five, and three, is wanted at once by the ducal head forester, Günther."

She re-read the item and then sat motionless for some fifteen minutes, until the clock on the mantelpiece struck six. She sprang up suddenly, hastily put on her hat and coat, took up her muff and left the room. She avoided the main staircase and went down by the stairs used by the servants. Here she knew was a side door from which a road led to the stables and round the hill through now the leafless lilac bushes.

She walked with short, rapid steps, the beating of her heart stifled her. The windows of the duchess's apartments threw a reddish light into the snowy evening, lighting the path. She soon reached the foot of the hill and walked along the castle square toward the head forester's house. The first carriage load of guests was just moving slowly up the steep ascent; torches flared at the entrance to

the castle court and cast their uncertain light upon the buildings and the bare branches of the trees in the park.

In a few moments, Hedwig von Kerkow had reached the head forester's and entered the dimly lighted vestibule. The bell gave a loud, discordant jangle, two badger dogs came yelping to meet her, and, shortly after, a maid appeared from a room on the right, followed by three children.

"Is the head forester at home?"

"Yes. What name shall I give?"

"Say that a lady has come in reply to his advertisement."

The girl in departing looked Hede over from head to foot. In a short time she returned.

"The head forester begs that you will come in at once. He will be at your disposal in a moment. She led Hede into a room; a lamp was burning on the study table and cast its light on the papers that were strewn about; a chair was pushed back as though some one had risen in haste.

"Take a seat," said the maid, pushing a chair into the middle of the room.

Hede thanked her but remained standing. The maid busied herself about the stove. A fine pointer got up from his comfortable resting-place and came slowly towards the stranger; he stopped before her, wagging his tail and looking at her with his bright intelligent eyes, while she gently patted him on the head.

"If you are anxious to get the place, don't say anything about the young lady he was going to

marry," the maid suddenly began with coarse familiarity. "That was the reason Miss Stübken was sent flying yesterday, and she thought she was managing so cleverly. For my part, I'm glad the old busybody has gone."

Hede measured the girl with a cool glance and turned to the dog again. After lingering awhile longer, the maid left the room.

Hede was still busied with the dog when Günther entered.

"Forgive me for keeping you waiting," he said. "Will you not sit down?"

He motioned toward the sofa and took the chair opposite her.

"I have come——" she began, flushing scarlet.

"Yes, I know," he interrupted, examining the sad, delicate face. "I am a widower, and am looking for a lady who is fond of children and who will undertake the management of my house. You would find plenty of work and very little quiet; I am not at home all the time, but I do not require any attention. Seeben, an old woodsman who was crippled by a gunshot wound, is my factotum and sees to my wants, so I shall be no burden to you. Still, you do not look strong—I am afraid the place may be too hard for you."

"Oh, I am sure that it will not be!" she answered. "I like housekeeping and taking care of children. I have had little experience it is true, but perhaps you will give me a trial?"

"Have you any references?" he inquired.

"No," she answered. "I have never held any

position before ; I lived with my mother until a short time ago. She died very suddenly, and I feel so alone and want something to do. I read your notice and I came at once."

He looked at her attentively. A thin, refined face that changed color nervously, lines of pain about the delicate mouth, and a pair of large, dark eyes that revealed much of hidden sorrow and of bitter experience. He liked those timid, questioning eyes.

"Could you come at once?"

She hesitated.

"Yes," she said, "I think my brother will be willing."

"Does your brother live here?"

"Yes, he lives here," she faltered; "he is the court-marshal, Von Kerkow."

The man before her rose abruptly to his feet. Kerkow's sister! He walked across to his desk and turned over the papers uncertainly with a trembling hand. The sister of the man to whom he indirectly owed the bitterest experience of his life!

"Does your brother know?" he asked, automatically.

"No," she answered, "but I am sure that he would be glad if we could remain near each other. We are very necessary to each other."

"But would the court-marshal like to see his sister in a subservient position?"

"If I did not hold it here I should elsewhere. Neither his circumstances nor mine are such as to——"

He interrupted her quickly.

"I should first like to have the court-marshal's permission——"

"I am of age," she answered; "I am thirty-two. But if you have any scruples—it would have been—it would have been a happiness to me to remain near my brother."

She rose and prepared to take her leave. A light seemed to break in upon him all at once.

"If you wish to try it," he said. "I should think myself fortunate to know that my children were in such excellent hands, and I should be glad if you could come soon, very soon. As far as it is in my power, I will make the position pleasant for you; you must be lenient with me, though, for I was not brought up in a drawing-room. If I——"

She held out her hand to him.

"I promise you to do all in my power for the children. I trust that I shall be able to win their hearts."

He shook the proffered hand.

"And the terms?" he said, uncertainly.

"That I will leave to you," she answered with decision. "Give me what you gave my predecessor, or less, but in any case, before we come to an agreement, let us see whether you are satisfied with my services. And now let me see the children, please."

He left the room with his heavy stride, and returned with the youngest in his arms, the other two at his side.

"This is your new auntie—you will allow it, will

you not, gnädiges fräulein?" he added in some confusion.

"Gladly," she replied; "and do not call me by any title—simply Miss Kerkow, or Miss Hedwig. Come here, children, and tell me your names."

She took the little one from him and seated herself with the child on the nearest chair, while she smiled pleasantly at the two older ones. Undismayed by the unresponsive looks of the shy children, she bravely went on talking and asking questions about dolls and rocking-horses. The boy was the first to respond, then Agnes joined in, in her serious way, and little Mariechen finally grew talkative also. The quiet room echoed with the little one's chatter.

"You are going to stay now?" asked the boy.

"Not now; but I am coming again day after to-morrow."

"Why don't you stay now?" said the eldest. "Papa is so sad, it isn't a bit nice!"

"I am coming day after to-morrow, and you will have to go to bed without me to-night and to-morrow night. But the next night I shall be here and I will tell you stories."

The children were satisfied, and they and their father accompanied the new aunt as far as the front door. With a bright "*Auf wiederschen!*" she left them and rapidly retraced the road she had come. The head forester, however, remained standing by the window and looked after the slender figure of the woman who had come so unexpectedly into his life.

Kerkow's sister in his house ! The sister of the man who had been in his mind day and night, whom he had regarded only with the deepest, bitterest hatred ! And now, in a flash, he realized how matters had stood between Aenne and the young man. He had given up the girl he loved and taken the other for his family's sake ; and the poor child, rendered desperate by anger and pain, had taken refuge in his arms. On the threshold of marriage she had broken down under the impossibility of loving another ; he, however, was dragging himself to the altar, in spite of the certain misery that lay before him.

The head forester felt his hatred vanishing, but he sighed as he recollected that he, too, had been drawn into the struggle, and that every one knew of his wounds. He had told himself that it should be the last time a woman should have any part in his life. He whistled to the dog and sitting down on the sofa, patted the brute's head.

"You are the truest of them all," he said, gently. "When you and I are out in God's broad forest, together, we forget all about the wretchedness and smallness of life, eh, Diana?"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE next day dawned—Heinz Kerkow's wedding-day. There was an expression of such gravity and resolution on Aenne's face that her brother Walter, the student, said that she looked as though she were going to be married instead of Toni.

"We are going to drive to the shooting-lodge with Richard Meyer," he added. "Don't you want to come with us? The sleighing must be fine."

"Pshaw!" growled Robert, the older brother, who considered brotherly consideration out of keeping in a lieutenant. "She'll only freeze. Stay at home, Aenne, and go and see the bride."

The mother and the aunt both glanced covertly across at Aenne. Robert had not been told of what was being said in Breitenfels, or he would not have made the suggestion. But Aenne answered, quietly,

"Of course I am going to the church—you are too, mamma, and auntie also, are you not?"

Mrs. May would rather have died than remain away on this occasion, and even if Heinz Kerkow had been her worst enemy she would have been present at his wedding.

"I am going so as to stop those gossiping tongues," she answered, "and you are very sensible to go too."

"Why should I not go?" returned Anne, purposely misunderstanding her mother's meaning. "I have not committed any crime, have I?"

Secure in the conviction that her secret was known only to Günther, with whom she knew it was as safe as in her own breast, she preserved her self-control completely; the inward despair, the old bitter pain was held in check. If in Heinz Kerkow's mind there still lingered the faintest suspicion that she was suffering on his account, he must be disabused of it to-day. She would then have the strength to persuade her parents to agree to what she had in mind.

The doctor had cards of admission to the church at his disposal, as had all the court officials and people of rank in the little capital. The women were expected to wear elegant visiting costumes, or what passed for elegant in Breitenfels; the men, dress coats and tall hats. It would certainly be something worth seeing, even though her Highness was unable to be present, for there had been no official festivities for a long time in the quiet life of the widowed duchess.

The wedding was to take place at half-past one, to be followed by a banquet to a select few; the young couple's departure was fixed for four o'clock.

It was a warm, muggy day, the snow was full of tiny holes, like a sieve, and every gutter dripped and gurgled. By noon it was almost dark.

Anne was in her room, already dressed in her simple gown of cashmere, waiting for the messenger who should come with the news of Miss Hochleit-

ner's indisposition. She grew white as her gown when she heard the bell ring below.

Then she heard some one calling her, hasty steps, the rustling of a silk dress.

"Here is a nice state of things!" cried the doctor's wife, throwing open the door, "Miss Hochleitner has been taken ill, Miss Friedrich is nowhere to be found! They want to know if you will sing the wedding hymn, as if you could do it at a moment's notice! Can you? If you can trust yourself, you are to go to the church at once, the organist says, to try it over with the organ."

"If I can help them out of a difficulty, I shall be very glad to," said Aenne, quietly, taking up her white cloak trimmed with swansdown, and following her mother.

"A carriage is waiting for you. Good heavens, what if you should spoil the whole thing? You had better refuse; think of the people who are to be there!"

"I have often sung before them," retorted Aenne.

"Yes, I know. But if you should break down, it would only make the talk worse; they are saying everywhere that it was in despair about Heinz that——"

Aenne turned toward her mother.

"I shall not break down," she said shortly, although the doubt in her own heart was stronger than ever.

The next moment she was seated in the court carriage, rolling toward the chapel which connected with the main building of the castle on the side to-

wards the gardens. A gem of late Gothic architecture, in good preservation and restored with understanding, it was almost the only sight of the little town, from an artistic standpoint, and was much visited by architects and artists. With its soaring columns and pointed arches, it looked like a Freiburg cathedral in miniature. Only the interior of the church was particularly impressive, for the façade had been built into the castle at a latter date. In order to reach the church one had to cross the great hall on the first floor of the main building ; thus the members of the ducal family could pass directly from the banqueting hall above to the gallery reserved for them, the princely chair, as it was called.

When Aenne passed through the high arched door into the dim room the dull light could scarcely penetrate through the painted windows—the place was still empty, save for a few servants who were busied about the richly decorated altar, or setting tapers with noiseless haste in the massive brass chandeliers (and sconces). The lofty room was filled with the scent of orange-blossoms.

The white-haired organist came down the winding stairs that led to the organ loft and approached Aenne with every sign of trepidation.

“Thank heaven, you have come ! Miss Hochleitner is as hoarse as a crow and Miss Friedrich is nowhere to be found either at home or at the theatre—Heaven knows where she can be ! Are you afraid, Aenne ?”

The girl was like his own daughter. Her voice

had often sounded from the organ loft, and even as a child, her sweet, clear tones had been raised in the Christmas anthem: "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, goodwill to men!"

"Shall we try it through quickly?" he asked.

"If you think it necessary," she answered. "I am perfectly familiar with the hymn."

"You are? That takes a load from my heart! You know where you are to come in?"

"Perfectly." She smiled at him and the old man regained his color. "Don't be alarmed," she said bravely; "I shall not disgrace you."

The candles were lighted now and the wedding guests were beginning to arrive. Under the ducal gallery, the folding doors that led from the hall of the castle were thrown open, and the lackeys stationed themselves on either side of the steps; the aisle leading to the altar was covered with red carpeting.

The church bells pealed out overhead. There was not an empty seat in the chapel. Aenne caught sight of her mother and beside her Aunt Emilie, in an old-fashioned crepe de Chine gown and her best lace cap; behind them sat her father, his coat adorned with orders.

Suddenly every neck was craned in the direction of the entrance from the castle. Several more lackeys entered and joined the others forming a living lane; Madam von Gruber in wine-colored velvet trimmed with fur, followed, escorted by an old gentleman in a general's uniform, an uncle of the bride; behind them came several elderly couples and

a pale young woman leaning on the arm of an elderly cavalier.

Aenne stared at them indifferently as they slowly advanced towards the altar along the carpet strewn with green boughs. All at once, she shrank back and pressed her hand to her heart. The organ behind her had burst into joyous strains—the bridal couple were descending the steps. She felt the drops of perspiration start upon her forehead, she clung for support to the choir railing and stared down with wide eyes at the man on whose arm leaned the bride, resplendent in tulle, satin, and lace. Had she trusted herself too far? She gazed wildly about, seeking escape—she stepped back—“Fly, fly!” she whispered.

Then her eyes met those of an old lady in the side nave, who was looking up at her with deep concern. Her strength returned to her suddenly, and, with tightly compressed lips, she watched the bride moving slowly up the carpeted aisle, saw the train of bridesmaids and groomsmen that followed, and halted, their backs to her, before the altar.

“Lord, show thy favor,” began the minister’s voice, and Aenne folded her hands on the railing and raised her head; her heart beat more quietly, and two big tears rolled slowly down her cheeks. At the solemn words all the bitterness and anger vanished, leaving only the sorrow, a deep, silent sorrow for the love that was lost to her.

At last the rings were exchanged, and the time had come when Aenne was to sing. The organ began softly, and, at the moment in which Heinz felt

the glittering ring upon his finger, a sweet, earnest, girlish voice rang through the lofty room, a voice that made his heart swell with rapture and pain,—

“Hallelujah! Great is his mercy!”

His eyes grew moist; he set his teeth together; he knew every modulation of that dear voice, and he could hear in it the rising tears. Had he not already known that she loved him, her voice would have revealed the truth to him now.

Like divine, unearthly music, the words sounded in his ears.

The doctor's wife suddenly bent her head over her hymn book and wept; Aunt Emilie sat staring up at the girl; her white figure might have been that of an angel in the dim light.

Aenne stepped back, the choir took up the refrain, and she sank down upon the little seat beside the organ. No one noticed her. When the blessing had been spoken, the last verse of the choral sung, she crept down the stairs in silence; the carriage that had brought her drove up at the porter's call, and she slipped in in breathless haste. On reaching home, she fled to her room and locked herself in.

Half an hour later the others returned. There came a knock at her door and a summons to dinner. A few moments later she entered the dining-room, where her father, mother, and aunt were already seated.

Her father, who was usually chary with his praise, held out his hand.

“You sang very well, Aenne,” he said approvingly.

"Miss Hochleitner herself couldn't have done better," said her mother, nodding to her as she brandished the soup ladle. "The organist is coming by and by to thank you."

Aenne looked at her affectionately.

"I am glad that my singing pleased you, for I have something to ask you in connection with it. Afterwards," she cried. "Eat your dinner first: there is no such haste!"

"Some new music, I suppose," said the mother. "You will have to hand over a few marks, May."

"A few marks!" repeated Aenne, and a sort of terror came over her; she was about to ask such a very great deal.

"Why don't you eat?" asked her mother.

"Don't be vexed, mamma; I can't," she pleaded.

"You seem excited—is it something so very important?"

"Yes," she answered faintly.

The simple meal was soon ended.

"Well, now you can unburden your heart to us," said the doctor.

"May I speak with you alone first, papa?"

"Dear me, how mysterious this sounds! Well, come along."

Aenne followed him to the study, brought him his cigar-case and holder, and lighted a match for him. When he had drawn the first puff, she came and stood before him. Her trembling fingers were interlaced, her eyes, big with excitement, were fixed upon his.

"Dear papa," she began, "I want to ask you to let me study to be a singer."

He stared at her, unpleasantly surprised.

"You sing very well as it is," he answered.

"But not well enough to make it a profession."

"A profession, indeed! What kind of profession is that? You surely are not thinking of going upon the stage?"

"Not exactly, papa; I would like to sing in concerts and in church, and give lessons."

"What put this into your head?"

"I want to have some mission in life, some profession."

"Are you so tired of your home?"

"Oh, papa, of course not! But I am so superfluous here. I want to go into the world, do something, be something——"

"You have given up the best of all life's missions."

She pressed her hands to her quivering lips.

"I could not help it, indeed, papa!"

"And what would you want to do?"

"I should have to go to Berlin or Dresden to study."

"And where am I to get the money for such expensive studies?"

At this juncture the mother entered; her glance passed hastily from Aenne to her husband; she saw that something serious was afloat.

"Well, what is going on?" she asked.

The doctor cleared his throat.

"Aenne wants to study music in Dresden," he said quietly.

His wife gave a short laugh, and then stopped under her daughter's look.

"I am not in a position to enable you to study," the father continued.

"But—Walter is studying, and Robert——" objected Aenne.

"Don't talk such nonsense!" interposed her mother, "Walter is a boy, and——"

"And if I were a boy," the girl broke in, "should I have to sit with folded hands, without any object in life. Would there be nothing for me?"

"But you are not a boy, so be satisfied," cried the mother sternly. "Be glad that you still have your parents and have no need to go among strangers!"

"Am I to do nothing, learn nothing?"

"Do nothing? There is plenty for you to do—cook, mend, dust, take care of your mother——"

"But, mamma, there are three here to do that; You are condemning me to a life of dreadful inactivity."

"It is the life that most girls live until they marry; you are meant to be a help and comfort to your parents, and later to be the wife of some good man. Don't say anything more about it."

"I am no help to you, and I cannot be a comfort to you if I am not happy," persisted Aenne, "and I can be happy only when I have some new, congenial work. As for marrying, mamma, I shall never marry."

The mother, crimson with anger, was about to make another violent retort, when her husband laid his hand soothingly upon her shoulder.

"Child," he said to his daughter, "we will not continue the conversation; it would be a waste of time—I have not the means."

"Then I must see what I can do alone," she answered, turning to go.

"Aenne," cried the mother, beside herself at the girl's obstinacy, and grasping her by the arm, "has your reason wholly deserted you? Who put such crazy ideas into your head?"

The girl released herself quietly with one long, sorrowful look at the excited woman.

"It is useless to say anything more, mamma. You cannot or will not understand me. I really do not know what I am good for here."

"And where is your father to get the money? Have you no consideration for him?"

"Yes, I understand how it is—since I am only a girl, I have no right to demand anything; if I were called Kunz or Hans, the money would be found," she answered. "I will try to get along without it."

She left the study, and going into the parlor, seated herself by the window, smiling bitterly to herself. The tinsel streamers on the Christmas tree on the centre table rustled softly; a sweet, resinous atmosphere of Christmas pervaded the room. Once this had all been pleasant and delightful to her; was it she alone that had changed? She passed her hand over her forehead. No, she could not go on living such a life, for she was no longer the care-free child she had once been. To live on in Brietenfels meant the extinction of all her powers, existence weighed upon her like lead. Her mother's excited voice

reached her from time to time—had she really wounded her parents so deeply by her wish to make use of her gift?

She had known that she was acting in defiance of all traditions, which required that the daughters should sit quietly at home, waiting till an acceptable suitor should present himself.

“It is too degrading,” she murmured. “And twenty suitors might come, but she could never love one of them, for there was one whom she could never forget.

She would write to the duchess and ask her for assistance. How many were studying with such help! But would her Highness listen to her? “I will go to Madam von Gruber to-morrow and ask for an audience,” was her final resolve.

A door closed sharply; her mother crossed the hall and entered the room, flushed and tearful. As she caught sight of her daughter sitting there immovable, she turned abruptly and went out. Her steps died away in the kitchen.

“Ungrateful child!” she murmured to herself as she went.

Anne was left alone with her unpleasant reflections. In about half an hour Aunt Emilie appeared; the kind old face looked sadly at the girl through the falling twilight.

Anne rose.

“I am here, auntie.”

“Come to your father again, child; he wants to see you.”

She crossed the hall at the old lady's side.

"We have been talking the matter over," began the doctor, "and I am willing to admit that you must feel the need of a change after what has taken place. On the other hand, I believe that you are like hundreds of others who only appreciate their happiness when they have lost it. You do not realize how well off you are here, how guarded and shielded and loved——"

He was so moved that he could get no further.

"Papa," she whispered, leaning on his shoulder, "I appreciate it all; I am very grateful to you. If you were old and feeble, I should not leave you for a moment; but you are young, comparatively, and strong—am I to let my abilities go to waste? And if I never learn to depend upon myself, how will it be with me when I do not have you? You can leave me nothing, you say—am I to be a burden to my brothers? And, aside from all else, would you deny me the satisfaction of turning my talent to account and shaping my life according to my own wishes?"

"All this sounds very fine in theory, but it is quite another thing in practice, child. You do not know the world; you expect to accomplish great things, but you will find nothing but hard work and disappointment."

She drew up her slight figure.

"I have strength, papa."

"You will come home with broken wings—but as you please!"

"You consent, papa?" she cried.

He avoided her embrace.

"I do not wish to hear the reproach, some day, that your life was spoiled, so I consent reluctantly, very reluctantly, to your making a trial. And further than that I can give you nothing but the promise that when you come home, weary and heartsick, you will find the old love and care awaiting you."

Aenne stood looking at her father in perplexity, her arms had fallen to her sides.

"Thank you, papa," she murmured. "Your consent is a great deal, and the assurance that I can return whenever I wish to—but——"

Aunt Emilie came forward.

"I have told your father," she began shamefacedly, "that it made no difference whether I spent my few pennies here or in Dresden, and—you cannot go alone. As for the lessons—I haven't much longer to live. I will withdraw a small mortgage I hold in Königsberg; it will certainly be enough."

The girl flung herself, sobbing, upon the old lady's breast.

"O auntie, auntie!" she cried.

"Go to your mother, child, and say a kind word to her. Don't you suppose that it must be hard for her to have her daughter wish to leave her?"

Aenne hastened from the room and found her mother sitting crouching on her bed, her eyes still angry.

"Well, have you gotten you own way?" she demanded.

"Mamma," cried Aenne, kneeling down beside her, "say one kind word to me! You do not know; ah, you do not know——"

"What is there to say? Instead of becoming a happy wife, you want to go wandering about the country, amusing people. And instead of grandchildren you will bring me a withered laurel wreath, if you are fortunate."

"But when my brothers marry, they——"

"Ah, but they are not like a daughter's children! And when I am old and feeble and a widow, perhaps, there will be no refuge for me in your house; I shall not be able to take your children in my lap, but shall be hustled about by strangers, and it will be a mercy if you can find the time to come to my funeral!"

"But, mamma," remonstrated Aenne, "I will come the moment you are in need of me."

"I'm not so sure! If a girl can't understand her own mother's feelings, she must be lacking in natural affection. And you are my only daughter!"

Aenne rose. She was familiar with the good-hearted but hasty woman's illogical reasoning. She stroked her hair gently and laid her cheek to hers.

"Come," she pleaded, "be good to me, or you will be dreadfully sorry when I am gone."

At this her mother burst into tears and drew her child to her lap.

"If Emilie were not going with you, it would kill me!" she sobbed. "And now, go to your father and tell him to come to me—I cannot talk with any one but him just now."

CHAPTER XVII.

AFTER the conclusion of the wedding festivities, an unpleasant scene took place in Madam von Gruber's salon. The old lady was extremely angry at Hede von Kerkow's announcement that she was about to assume the management of head forester Günther's household, under Madam von Gruber's very eyes, and in close proximity to her brother.

"I can never, under any circumstances, give my consent," she said angrily, when she saw that she could accomplish nothing by dignified remonstrance.

"But, aunt, I am my own mistress," answered Hedwig, now angry in her turn.

"Then be your own mistress where you please, but not here. I will not permit it!" cried the old lady, starting from her chair and rustling about the room in her long-trained gown—she was still in full dress. "Do you hear? I forbid it!"

"Aunt," said Hede, decisively, "as long as Heinz has consented, you certainly cannot——"

"Heinz cannot have consented to such a step! I do not believe it!"

"My dear aunt, I cannot compel you to believe me, but it is true none the less. I never lie."

"What will her Highness think when she hears that her court-marshal's sister is—housekeeper to head forester Günther?"

"I believe her Highness is a very unprejudiced woman."

"A woman of very sensitive feelings would be more correct."

"But how can my existence concern her? Oh, have pity on me!" cried the girl in despair.

"You should have remained where you were and gone on with your painting."

"But I felt that it was impossible—that loveless, solitary life would have killed me; and I know that it is a great comfort to Heinz to have me near him."

"Heinz is a——" Madam von Gruber swallowed the word—"if he is silly enough to approve of your course. And what will Toni say?"

"What do I care about Toni?" cried Hedwig. "I want nothing to do with her, nor does she with me! I will never trouble either you or her with my presence, and when I want to see Heinz, I can see him in his own room. And even if I do not see him for weeks, I have the consciousness at last, that some one dear to me is not far off and that if I am in need of a few kind words, he may have some to spare me—it seems to me that no one can have the heart to grudge me this."

"You haven't a particle of pride or appreciation of your rank."

"One forgets such things in my condition," Hede murmured, and she gave an abrupt little laugh while her eyes filled with tears.

"One should always remember one's birth, no matter what happens."

"I mean to do so, aunt. Moreover, Ottilie held a position very much like the one I am to hold in head forester Günther's house."

"There was a woman there."

"Ah, yes!" Hedwig smiled; it was a sad smile; and she glanced in the mirror at her pale, tear-stained face, her fragile figure. "May I come to say good-bye to you early to-morrow morning, aunt?" she asked, as though it were not worth while to notice the objection.

"If you persist in carrying out your plan, I should prefer that you did not," was the harsh reply.

"If you feel so, aunt, I can leave to-night," answered Hede.

"Do not put yourself out," was the unfeeling retort.

Hede Kerkow turned upon her heel.

"Good-bye, aunt," she said.

She received no reply. On reaching her room, she hastily tossed her few belongings into her trunk and locked it; then she hurried through the snow to the head forester's house.

Günther was not at home, and had no suspicion of what was taking place during his absence. He had driven with his Highness to Harterode after dusk. The duke wished to take advantage of the bright moonlight to get a shot at a fox, a pleasure that he allowed himself once a year; but before the moon had risen, heavy snow clouds had gathered, and he had been obliged to abandon his project and return home in a very bad humor.

When they reached the castle the duke's adjutant

approached his master and said something in an undertone, Günther remained standing aside, awaiting his release; the duke dismissed him briefly and, accompanied by the adjutant, hastened across the courtyard to the wing occupied by the dowager duchess. Günther caught the question, "Is May with her?" At the main door of the castle, he met the steward hastening up from his house, which stood next to the head forester's.

"Do you know how things are, Günther?" the man inquired anxiously.

"I have just returned from Harterode, I know nothing—what has happened?"

"The duchess has had a stroke, so I hear."

"I have heard nothing about it—I hope the report will prove unfounded," said Günther, and the two men saluted and separated. "At her age," he muttered to himself, "it would not be surprising." And he slowly made his way homeward.

On the castle square the snow lay fresh and untrodden, save for a single track; the footsteps had ignored the path made on one side by the snow-plough, and led straight through the deep snow directly to his house. He paused involuntarily before the door and looked at the delicate imprints of a woman's foot, as though he were examining the fresh track of wild game in the forest. They must have been very small feet, scarcely treading down the snow, so lightly and hurriedly had they passed—and these footprints led to his house!

But whoever had come there had not come for him. He felt tired and lonely, and he dreaded his

cheerless home and the noise of his neglected children, who since Miss Stübken's departure had run wild over the house. The maid servant could not manage them, and it had fallen upon him to administer punishment and restore harmony. His table was badly set, the meals poorly cooked—he could not eat and, in despair, he would seek refuge in his study and take up his work in order to forget. But the feeling of loneliness and discomfort was stronger than the desire for work.

He was still standing staring at the footprints; at last he mounted the steps, instinctively avoiding the tiny tracks; after laying aside his rifle and game-bag, he went as usual to the nursery. Before opening the door he glanced involuntarily at the clock. It was past nine. Could the children be asleep? The room was so extraordinarily still. He opened the door and stepped in. On the table under the hanging lamp, were the little ones' empty soup plates, a loaf of bread, and some butter. All was still. He was about to withdraw, when a child's happy laugh sounded through the half-open door, a laugh as joyous and exuberant as the notes of a finch in the woods in spring time. Immediately after, he heard a woman's gentle voice.

"You little monkey, will you be still? I shall go away at once if you are not good."

"No, no, no!" cried the three small voices in chorus.

"Be quiet, Mariechen, or I'll whip you," added the eldest.

"Now fold your hands and say your prayers,"

commanded the woman's voice, and she began the old, childish prayer,—

“Tired am I, go to your rest.”

He had entered softly as though drawn by some invisible power. In the dim light of the night-lamp, a white figure was kneeling beside the baby's cot ; she did not see the intruder, her hands were clasped above the bed and her dark head was bent over the child.

A strange feeling stole over the man in the doorway, he did not comprehend it all yet—the small foot prints outside, the girl in the white dress ; had the Christmas angel visited the house ?

“Amen !” she said aloud at last. “Now go to sleep like good children, and to-morrow we will study and play together ; won't that be nice ?”

He advanced a few paces nearer, she turned and looked at him.

“Miss von Kerkow ?” he asked smiling.

“You must forgive me for coming to-night ; I—I could not do otherwise.” She was confused by his questioning look. “I hurried away just as I was,” she stammered, glancing down at her evening gown.

“You are heartily welcome, Miss von Kerkow. I am only afraid that your room will not be in readiness.”

“Do not let that trouble you. I have already spoken to the maid.”

He went up to the children's beds.

“Good-night,” he said, and gave them each a kiss.

"I hope you will always be good and obedient to your new auntie."

There was a unanimous shout of "Yes, papa!" and the eldest added, "You must go with papa, now; he is always very hungry when he comes back from hunting, aren't you, papa?"

He nodded smilingly.

"We will not ask that of Miss von Kerkow to-night; the festivities and the fright afterwards must have tired her.

Hedwig Kerkow looked at him in surprise; they were now standing in the sitting-room.

"When did it happen?" he asked. "Wasn't her Highness at table?"

"I do not know what you mean," she answered.

"Why, I thought—but no, it could have nothing to do with your coming beforehand. Don't you know that her Highness has had a stroke?"

"No!" she answered, horror-stricken. "When? I have been here about an hour."

"It must have happened a very short time ago—I do not know anything further. His Highness was informed of it upon our return from the forest."

The maid entered at this moment with a plate of cold meat and baked potatoes.

"Will you not join me, Miss von Kerkow?" Günther asked, placing a chair for her. "Another place, Caroline!"

Hedwig Kerkow sat down.

"Here is the bread knife," said Caroline. "The other housekeeper always used to cut the bread."

Hede took up the loaf with trembling fingers;

she scarcely knew what she was doing. The duchess had had a stroke! She could think of nothing beyond that.

"At the duchess's age," continued the head forester, when he had helped Hede and began to eat with a sense of comfort long unknown to him, "such an attack is scarcely to be wondered at unfortunately."

The maid had left the room. Hede Kerkow sat and stared at her plate, it was impossible for her to touch anything. What would happen if the duchess were to die? The future of her brother, her sister-in-law and her aunt, all depended upon this feeble life.

The door bell rang sharply, hasty steps crossed the hall, then followed a loud knock, and the steward entered.

"Things are in a bad way up there, Günther," he said, after making a clumsy bow. "May gives no hope: her Highness has had another stroke. The duke has telegraphed to Nice to the duchess and the young duke to return without delay, and the court-marshal will find a telegram awaiting him in Berlin, ordering his immediate return.

"His presence would be very necessary, should the worst happen," remarked the head forester.

"Her Highness was feeling tolerably well this noon," the steward went on. "When the young couple came out of church, she received them in the red room; she said she was sorry that she could not be present at the ceremony, but that she was not quite herself. At six o'clock she asked her waiting

woman for a cup of tea and complained of cold, something very unusual with her. At seven she asked for his Highness, also something unusual, and at half-past eight, she became unconscious. Her right side is paralyzed, and she cannot speak. Ah, Günther, there is little doubt but what we shall have to order our crape!"

Hedwig rose.

"Sir, I—I would like—no," she broke off, "it would be useless."

"If you think you can be of any assistance to your aunt, you should most certainly go back to the castle."

She shook her head and controlled herself with a great effort.

"Thank you, but I could do nothing."

"Miss von Kerkow," called Caroline, opening the door, "your trunk has come."

"Hadn't you better go to your room now, Miss von Kerkow? You have your belongings to arrange—I shall see you to-morrow morning early," he said kindly, for her agitation had not escaped him.

She bowed silently and withdrew. The steward looked after her.

"That is Kerkow's sister, isn't it?" he asked with an ironical smile. "His easy times won't last much longer; a court-marshal will soon be superfluous here; he will be at liberty to go as soon as he has made the funeral arrangements."

"It is hard on him. Won't he have a right to a pension?"

"Scarcely! He has hardly so much as got his hand in."

"But he gave up his career for it," observed the head forester.

"What did he do it for? It was his own look-out. It will be very quiet in Breitenfels now," he went on, draining the glass of beer that the head forester had poured out for him. "The place will fall asleep, and we with it. Well, well, the end must come to us all sooner or later!"

With this commonplace he got up, shook the head forester by the hand, and took his leave, to go back to the castle to hear the latest news.

Hedwig had seated herself in her cold room, which was next to the children's nursery; it was not much better than a servant's room, with the shabby, cheap carpet, the cramped wardrobe, the iron bedstead, and the worm-eaten chest of drawers. But she paid no heed to her surroundings; she was thinking only that the one person she loved in the world, her brother, was to be driven from his secure haven out upon the sea of life, burdened by a wife and without means of subsistence. If he were free, she would have no fears for him, but as it was—

She began mechanically to unpack her trunk; then she hesitated; what if Heinz did not remain in Breitenfels? The next moment, however, she flushed and threw back her head with an air of decision; she remembered the motherless children in the next room, the man with the tired, anxious eyes to whom she had voluntarily offered her services, and she hastily hung her clothes in the press, laid her linen

in the chest of drawers, placed the photographs of her mother and Ottilie on the top, and then prepared for bed.

She had just opened the window to let the pure, keen air into the room, when a deep, solemn tone was borne in upon her ear, followed by a second and a third—it was the chapel bell announcing to the little town and the countryside that the old duchess had fallen into her last sleep.

Hede leaned her head against the window-sill and folded her hands; the deep, solemn notes soothed her heart like the soft strains of a lullaby. So weary of life was she that the tolling bell was a comfort to her.

“Rest comes at last, and sleep,” she murmured to herself.

Sleep seemed to her the greatest possible boon, after the gray, dreary day that life had been to her. She did not wish to think of a reawakening; she, who had once been so devout, had but one wish—to sleep never to wake again, even in another world. Her soul had never been happy, it had never found happiness here.

The bells tolled on for an hour longer, and in the midst of their tolling she sought her bed and fell asleep.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Six days later, Hedwig Kerkow was sitting in the living-room of the head forester's house, the youngest child was beside her on the window seat, busy with her doll, which she was enveloping in a black cloth ; the children were going to play " funeral " by-and-by.

Hedwig had not found much time for rest ; she had devoted herself wholly to the duties she had undertaken, and there was much to be done. The first transformation she had brought about, was in Caroline. The girl who, under Fraülein Stübken's rule, had been disrespectful and self-willed, had become modest and obedient. The entire house had been subjected to a thorough cleaning ; at every window hung new curtains, to the purchase of which the forester had readily consented, upon Hedwig's representation that the old ones were beyond repair. Hedwig had selected them herself, and in place of the stiff, blue-white monstrosities, now hung inexpensive but tasteful lace curtains, which made a marked improvement in the appearance of the rooms. The table was attractively set, the broken china had been ruthlessly banished, and Caroline served the meals in a neat white apron and with respectful demeanor.

The children were immaculate in white pinafores ; doors were no longer banged noisily ; even the dogs behaved better and ate their food in a corner of the hall with just as good an appetite as they had formerly eaten it in the sitting-room.

The refined presence of the new mistress of the house produced in itself an atmosphere of comfort.

The head forester's room was the only one that was left undisturbed. The lonely man remained there as before, alone with his sorrow, and appeared only at meals and that but seldom, for he often had his dinner at some forester's house whither his business took him, and did not reach home until nightfall.

Hedwig did not trouble herself about his absence ; indeed, she scarcely noticed it. The only time she had for reflection belonged to her brother. As yet she had not seen him, and had received only a few hasty lines to the effect that he and his wife had returned at once and that he had more than he could do with the preparation for the funeral ceremonies. A great number of guests from a distance were expected, half the capital was to be present.

At two o'clock that day the body was to be borne to the vault at Holmsrode, one of the ancient Breitenfels possessions. The old duke lay there ; it had been his favorite place during his lifetime, and his wife was to rest beside him as he had wished. The distance to Holmsrode could be covered in an hour with two fast horses, but the funeral cortége would require three hours ; it was January besides, and very cold.

The square was full of people ; the road from the castle was lined with crape-hung flag-staffs from which black streamers fluttered at half-mast, and the firmly packed snow was covered with fir boughs, like a thick green carpet. Soldiers formed a line on each side of the way and behind them the crowd pushed and surged.

There was a sudden movement among the waiting throng. The bells began to toll, the guard at the castle gate stood to arms. A portion of the Jaeger battalion garrisoned at the capital came first ; then followed the ducal forest officials ; after them and drawn by eight horses came the bier, whose black velvet pall embroidered with the ducal crown was borne by eight foresters. Behind the bier walked the duke with his son the young heir apparent. A long line of distinguished mourners followed. At the foot of the steep hill, the procession halted ; the duke and the court officials, the duchess and her ladies, entered the waiting carriages, which joined the train.

Hedwig Kerkow thought she recognized her sister-in-law in one of the carriages, her brother in another.

To the solemn measure of martial music, the cortège moved slowly forward in the direction of the silent, forest-girt castle in whose vault the dead was to be laid.

Breitenfels would now be stricken from the list of resident castles and it would enter upon the sleep that had come to so many noble and ancient palaces. In the apartments of the dowager duchess the curtains would soon be drawn down ; one or two ser-

vants, with the old castellan, would creep about like ghosts, and no lights would be seen in the windows save for a few weeks in autumn, during the hunting season.

Hedwig gave a deep sigh as the last carriage vanished from sight. If she could only know what Heinz's future was to be!

That evening, as she sat alone in the living-room—the children had gone to bed, and the master of the house was in his study—there was a ring at the door, and a moment later Caroline appeared with a note from Heinz.

“Come to me for half an hour if you can. The bearer will wait and accompany you.”

Hede put on her cloak, tied a lace scarf about her head, and after telling Caroline to say to the head forester, in case he inquired for her, that she had gone to her brother, she left the house, accompanied by the man-servant.

“The court-marshal still occupies his old rooms,” volunteered the man.

When they reached the castle, Hedwig thanked him and ascended the stairs to the first floor; there she paused involuntarily and looked around her. The wide corridor that led to the dowager duchess's apartments was lighted by only a single lamp; cypress boughs and white flowers lay on the black carpet, and the scent of the tube-roses was almost overpowering. The stillness was unearthly. The servants might either be in their dining-room or have gone to their homes. The foreign princes and other distinguished guests occupied that part of the castle

used by the reigning duke—here silence and loneliness reigned.

Hedwig Kerkow continued on her way upstairs. On the second floor she met Mrs. von Gruber's maid carrying a tea tray into the room of the ex-lady-in-waiting. On reaching the third floor, she went at once to the familiar door and knocked. A woman's voice called,—

“Come in!”

Hedwig entered with a look of disappointment; she had hoped to find her brother alone. The lamp on the writing-table was burning, indeed, but it did not suffice to light the great room. Heinz advanced toward his sister.

“How do you do, Hede? It was good of you to come,” he said. “Toni, here is Hedwig.”

From the depths of the huge armchair came a sound that might be taken for “How do you do?” and the young woman's face, doubly pale in contrast with the black gown, turned in her direction.

Hedwig went over to her.

“I am sorry, Toni, that your journey should have had so sad an interruption.”

Toni shrugged her shoulders imperceptibly and dropped her head in silence.

“I am completely worn out,” she said petulantly, after a pause.

“It is no wonder,” Heinz said pleasantly. “After that interminable drive to Holmsrode, the standing in the cold chapel, the drive home—you ought to go to your room and lie down.”

She rose.

"I am disturbing you, I dare say?" she asked, instead of replying.

Her face had grown a shade paler.

"By no means," he answered quietly, ignoring her rudeness. "I was thinking only of your own good. What I have to say to Hede you can most certainly hear. Well," he began when Hedwig had seated herself, "how are things going with you down yonder?"

He had lighted a cigar, and, leaning upon the writing-table, blew the smoke away from him with assumed composure; but his inward agitation was only too clear to his sister who knew him so well.

"Very nicely," she answered. "I have a great deal to do, and whenever I look up at the castle, it makes me happy to think that you are there. If I were to wave a handkerchief, would you be able to see it?"

"How touching!" said Toni mockingly.

"To be frank, Hede, I should prefer not to be where I could see your signal, but we shall probably remain neighbors. You understand me, child; I should like to put on a uniform again."

"Of course I understand, Heinz! I have been quite sure that you would want to, and I have accustomed myself to the idea of remaining here alone; I cannot give up my duties here."

"Of course not," remarked Toni. "I think you are counting on a very extended engagement."

Hedwig looked at her sister-in-law in surprise; she did not grasp the meaning of her words.

"Toni is sometimes moved to prophecy," Heinz

interposed jestingly. "Let us hope that she will prove right, Hede, for we shall remain here too—presumably until the end of our days, which, in view of this excellent air and an existence free from all excitement, will probably be some time in the remote ages. You see before you the governor of the castle, and over yonder the Frau Schlosshauptmann von Breitenfels, with free lodging and a salary that will protect us admirably against all pride and luxury, and a pension that will enable my wife to dress as befits her rank. What do you say now, Hede?"

The girl stared at the speaker, aghast.

"Heinz, you cannot, you must not!" she burst out. "Become a soldier again; you must not let yourself be buried alive here!"

"I cannot permit you to stir Heinz up like this," cried Toni. "I cannot imagine what you want! We have nice apartments, the old, pleasant social surroundings, and we shall always be foremost here. Heinz's desperate view of our position is altogether out of place."

"I am overjoyed at the prospect," he answered with a laugh. "I am sure I shall develop some unsuspected talent in this absolute quiet and idleness; I shall turn scientist or sportsman or painter, or I shall invent some new liqueur and become famous like Gilka. Who can tell what I may accomplish? Then, too, it is a piece of good fortune that I was given the title of governor. I ought to be called merely head castellan by right, eh?"

He tossed the half-smoked cigar into the fireplace

with a quick motion, and selected another from his case.

"Why can't you enter the service again?" Hedwig said in an unsteady voice.

"My dear girl, you have doubtless heard that in order to remain in the army, an officer must have a certain income, have you not? This is precisely what we lack. For a few days we didn't know exactly what was to become of us; it was unpleasant, wasn't it, Toni? I was at my wits' end. What was I to do? I was nobody and had nothing. And added to that there was a poor little wife whose existence forbade my making experiments, going to the Transvaal, for instance, or India, or Melbourne, in search of diamonds, gold, and Heaven knows what? We made a bad beginning, didn't we, Toni?"

He paused before her and looked down with real compassion upon the small white face, which was turned peevishly away from him.

"But the duke? Appeal to the duke, Heinz, I implore you?"

"The duke created this very position for my benefit, Hede; there has never been a *Schlosshauptmann von Breitenfels* within the memory of man."

"But it will be your ruin!" she cried. "It is a position fit only for a decrepit old man, not for you—you!"

Toni rose.

"I had better go," she said. "It is not pleasant for me to hear that your marriage with me will be your

ruin for otherwise—be quite frank—otherwise you two would go off to seek your fortune, to accomplish unheard-of deeds! At present, however, I am in the world, unfortunately——”

The rest was choked by tears, and, with her handkerchief to her face, she ran from the room, banging the door behind her.

“Excuse me a moment,” Heinz said with an altered expression. “I will be back again shortly.” And he hurried after his wife.

After a quarter of an hour he returned, and sat down opposite Hedwig in silence. He looked flushed and angry.

“Ah, well,” he said, “it is no use to quarrel over a difference of opinion; my wife and aunt think we are fortunate, and consider my position ideal. Aunt Gruber says that she agrees with the saying, ‘I had rather be the first in this town than second in Rome.’ So, Hede, we will go on with the part. But it is late now, child, and I had better see you home.”

She rose without a word, and without a word they walked along together side by side. They met no one; perfect stillness reigned, and above the castle stood the full moon, flooding it with a pale radiance. The castle lay there like a bit of the past, so spectral was it, so remote from the world, and the black standard fluttered above it like a mournful omen. And he was to live there, this young man with his enthusiasm for all things great and good and noble, who burned to be of some use, to have accomplished something worth while at his life's close,

and yet condemned to stifle all this precious youth in an idle, purposeless existence!

"Are you crying?" he asked, suddenly, putting his arm about her. "Do not cry, Hede!"

But she could control herself no longer, the tears would not be held back.

"Ah, Heinz," she sobbed, "why must you be so unhappy? If it had not been for us poor, miserable girls—why does God permit girls like us to be born? Why don't they kill them as soon as they come into the world, instead of letting them live to make themselves and every one else wretched?"

"Well," he said with a painful attempt at jesting, "that would, indeed, be a new solution of the woman-question. Let us talk about something else; but one thing more; you are fond of me, aren't you?"

"Ah, Heinz, Heinz, you are the only one in the world——"

"There, you see! And I am just as fond of you. And now we will stand by each other, eh, Hede? and hold up our heads always and in spite of everything!" When they reached the house door he took her hand and pressed it tenderly, while his eyes grew moist. "We will talk about our signal later," he went on. "Aunt Christiane will become reconciled to your position as soon as ennui has gotten the best of her. Good-night, dear!"

He turned abruptly and walked back toward the castle.

"How easily he takes the steep ascent," she thought, as she wiped the tears from her eyes.

“And he must remain here until he becomes an old and embittered man!” She pressed her hands together in anguish, and remained standing in the cold winter air, looking after him as long as his figure remained in sight.

There were others beside Hedwig von Kerkow who were weeping in Breitenfels that night; the poor who had lost in the duchess their benefactress, the ruling duchess, who had lost in her husband's step-mother a confidant who had untiringly pointed out to her wayward son the path of virtue, from which he was at times too ready to stray; the old and faithful servants who were placed on small pensions and forced to learn economy in their old age; the household officials who were left without positions. Mrs. May sat on her bed and wrung her hands over the misfortune that had fallen upon her house. Half of their income gone, their sons' demands larger than ever, Aenne, the sunshine of the house, far away. In place of a joyous wedding and pleasant intercourse with a happily married daughter, brief letters, constant anxiety and longing.

She looked at her husband as he lay asleep near her. He had aged greatly during the past weeks, and yet he must now work doubly hard to extend his practice, drive over the country in wind and weather, leave his warm bed at night to go out into the cold and storm. What had suddenly become of all the comfort and cheer that had made their modest home so pleasant? Gone with Aenne out into the wide, unknown world.

In her anguish of heart, she buried her tear-stained face in the pillows and stifled a sob so as not to awaken her husband; and a silent but passionate prayer went up to God for her sweet, rebellious child so far away.

CHAPTER XIX.

It was an evening in spring five years later. The air was full of the scent of syringa and jessamine; the delicate green of the trees was transfused with the evening sunlight. From the tower of the castle chapel came the sound of bells. Whitsuntide bells, and at their clangor a child of some four years in an invalid's chair opened his eyes in alarm. It was a pale, wasted little face from which these big, beautiful, shining eyes looked out. The chair had been wheeled upon the castle terrace into the shelter of the pavilion whose walls Heinz Kerkow had once adorned with frescoes. The sick child was carefully propped up with pillows and wrapped in shawls; an open picture book lay on the table at his side, and near it stood a glass of milk that was still untouched.

A short distance away a gentleman was sitting before an easel, painting, or rather he had been painting, for the hand in which he held the palette rested on his knee, his right arm hung straight at his side, the brush had fallen to the ground. He was staring with dazzled eyes at the sunny landscape before him.

The five years that Governor von Kerkow had spent here in the exercise of his duties must have

been very hard ones for him. He had grown thin, and two deep lines had imprinted themselves on his forehead; his eyes had a weary look, the look of a man who has nothing more to hope for, who has done with life and whose only aim is to go through it with as brave a front as possible.

"Papa!" cried the child in affright.

"Here I am, my boy!" he cried, jumping up and laying the palette on a chair.

The next moment he was at his son's side, bending over the little sufferer with an anxious face.

The child grew quiet at once and smiled up at his father.

"Ringin—what for?" he asked with an effort.

"To-morrow will be a holiday," the father said, bringing up his chair and sitting down beside the child, while he stroked the thin, little hand. "To-morrow will be Whitsunday, Heini."

"Will mamma go out driving?"

Heinz Kerkow nodded; a shadow crossed his face for a moment.

"Yes, my boy, she will probably go for a drive."

"And will you go too?"

"Shall I, Heini?"

The child's lips quivered.

"No, no! I am so afraid when I am left alone."

"I will stay with you; don't cry," said his father, soothingly. "We will tell each other stories and I will wheel you through the park—or do you want to go to Aunt Hede?"

"No, I want to stay with you; the children are so naughty."

"Not naughty, Heini; they are only lively and full of spirits, as you will be too, some day, God grant, my little man!"

The child shook his head.

"I never shall be, Papa."

"Indeed! What makes you think so?"

"I heard mamma tell Aunt Gruber so, Papa."

"You silly boy, you did not understand her."

"Yes, I did. Mamma said, 'He is a cripple and always will be, and it will do no good to dose him and torture him any longer.'"

Heinz Kerkow's face whitened.

"Mamma did not mean you, my pet; you must not take everything to yourself, or pay so much attention to what older people say to each other."

"But I don't want to be hurt by the machine any more."

"If you love me, Heini, you will bear it a little longer."

The child made no reply. There was something in his worn, haggard little face that was far beyond his years, a sort of bitter appreciation of his condition. Heinz sat by, struggling with his pity for this poor little creature who was his son, and with his anger at the heartlessness of the woman who had brought this child into the world, a frail child, but sound in body, who, through her fault, had become what he was now.

"He is a cripple and always will be," echoed in his ears. Barren and full of renunciation as his life was in this remote spot, he would have gone on living joyfully, if the lad could have romped at his

side through the dreary corridors of the castle, through the lonely walks of the park; but as it was—

He had entered into this marriage with no illusions, but he had not believed that it would be as desolate as it had proved. He had striven honestly to arouse in his wife some sympathy for what interested him, as he had honestly striven to bring himself more in touch with her own range of ideas. He paid calls with her in the neighborhood; he received her guests, in whom he took no interest and before whom he felt ashamed of the “five o’clock teas” which she instituted as an offset for the sumptuous dinners and suppers to which they were invited. He did not believe in accepting what they could not return. Toni took a more lofty stand.

“I don’t go into society for the sake of eating and drinking,” she would declare.

His counter argument that it was nevertheless expecting a good deal to ask people to drive several miles through the country and to offer them only a small cup of tea and some cake, she was pleased to ignore. Their means would not permit of anything more, and she could not live without society.

Nevertheless, the Kerkow establishment made a very good showing. The footman and coachman waited at table; they were a part of the ducal household, and together with horses and carriages were placed at the governor’s disposal. The furnishings of the rooms and the table appointments were handsome, the plate was a present from the old duchess.

Toni, therefore, managed to keep up a very imposing appearance.

But for Heinz the days dragged by as though they were weighted with lead. When he had put his signature to a few papers, had given orders for the repairs to which it was his duty to attend; when the head gardener had presented himself and handed in his account of the weekly supplies sent to the ducal kitchen and the sales from the hothouses; when the librarian had begged him for the hundredth time to petition the duke for the purchase of some work or other, an attempt which Heinz had long since abandoned as hopeless, his day's labors were over. He had leisure such as few men have for reading the papers, in winter or on dull, rainy days in the bow window; in summer on the terrace, which of late had been closed to the public; but however much time he might take, there was always too much of that precious commodity left him. What had he not tried in order to make it pass more rapidly? He had attempted painting and had copied every picture in the castle; but when he realized that he was nothing more than a very ordinary amateur, he had taken up flower and fruit culture, had sedulously accompanied the head forester on his hunting trips, but without finding any real pleasure in anything.

He would thus probably have sunk into a state of inertia had not his mind been suddenly aroused by a fortunate occurrence. The librarian was transferred to another ducal library, and the library at Breitenfels intrusted to the governor's care. The not in-

considerable collection of books and copperplate engravings, which a former duke with a taste for learning had brought together, was not to be open to the public, but was to remain in Breitenfels until it was removed to the library at the capital. Heinz von Kerkow had merely to keep the keys and to see that the books and folios did not become mouldy.

He had, therefore, often to go through the silent rooms ; now this picture or that would attract his notice, or the title of a certain book, and he would finger the leaves and begin to read ; history and literature, his old favorites, enthralled him anew, and without knowing it he began to study seriously, and to bury himself in the atmosphere of past ages.

When he went hunting now, or walked alone through the deep forest, or, accompanied only by his dog, rested on some silent, lonely hilltop, the autumn-tinted woods lying like waves of color at his feet, he forgot the present, his desolate condition, and another world awakened in his brain. Armor-clad knights met in combat, noble cavaliers and fair court ladies rode joyously to the hawking. His lively fancy quickened into life figures that had long since crumbled into dust. But the ones that rose most vividly before him were not of those who had drawn life's prizes, but of those who had once dragged out their lives in unfulfilled longing, sick at heart, and with weary limbs, in the valleys of the duchy, as he was doing.

Many a romance had been acted out in the course of years in Breitenfels and in the surrounding castles, and not all of them had had a happy ending. The

ancient chroniclers of Breitenfels had not broken lances alone to tell of, but broken hearts as well. True, the callous scribes passed over the sad stories with brief, cold words, but Heinz would pause thoughtfully over such passages. An unseen hand seemed to be touching the deepest chords of his nature; he read between the lines what the chronicler had left untold and there reached him from out of the past the old, old story of love and suffering.

One day he was walking through the silent forest, his gun slung over his shoulder. The deer had no cause to fear him, for the hunter was pursuing only the pictures that his imagination was weaving for him. He threw himself down in the shade of a tree and strove to put his inmost feelings into verse.

He did not stop at one poem; soon he began to write stories, to picture stirring scenes from the castles and strongholds, from the hills and valleys that he knew so well. Before he was aware of it, these sketches had grown into a book, which he re-read and elaborated with pleasure.

Hede learned nothing of his new occupation; she was too busy with her household duties; nor did he wish to confide his doings to the busy girl; the practical Hede was working, while he was pursuing unprofitable arts. And Toni? Toni had no appreciation for such things. She would ask now and again for some light French novel, and as the limited supply was soon exhausted she troubled herself no further about the library, and scornfully dubbed her husband a bookworm.

In the mean time, little Heini had come into the

world. The birth of the child was a great joy to him. Sitting by the side of the sleeping baby, he made plans as to how he should bring up his boy ; it should be very differently from the way he himself had been brought up—he should be a man who would be fitted to fill any position to which he might be called. He would devote his whole life and energy to the child.

When the little fellow began to sit up and make his first unintelligible attempts at speech, Heinz bought a camera. He turned an unused room into a dark room and took pictures of the child, oftentimes several in a day—the child with bare neck and arms ; in white, fur-trimmed cloak ; on his rocking-horse, held on by his nurse ; beside the Leonberg, on his mother's lap, and alone in a great armchair. It was delicious to watch the little fellow grow, begin to take his first steps, to hear him say, " Papa ! " for the first time. In those days Heinz was almost happy.

And then had come that terrible change. The camera was put out of sight ; the poor little cripple could not be photographed. That day had been the most terrible one in Heinz Kerkow's life—the day on which so fearful a misfortune had fallen on his child.

It had come during the previous summer, on a stifling August afternoon, when Toni, in spite of his remonstrances, had driven to Schloss Arnstein to call upon the Gräfin. The coachman and footman had hesitated, and the former had even ventured to hint at a heavy thunder-storm that was plainly threaten-

ing. But Toni's mind was made up. Even Aunt Gruber had tried to dissuade her, but in vain. Toni, who was usually so susceptible to extremes of temperature, seemed quite herself that day, when every one else was exhausted, and came downstairs in a light summer gown, holding the toddling child by the hand, just as Heinz had finished making the rounds, to satisfy himself that the shutters were all closed against the coming storm.

"You are going, Toni?" he had exclaimed.

"As you see. The storm will not reach here until evening, I feel sure of it."

"But the child must stay at home," he had said.

"No, he is coming with me; he has been looking forward to it so. Don't you want to go driving with mamma, Heini?"

"You would rather stay with papa, wouldn't you?" Heinz persisted.

The child broke into violent screams, such as Heinz had never heard from him before.

"It's the storm in the air that makes him do that," said the nurse; "he has been crying like that all day; he doesn't know what he wants. There, there, don't cry! You are going with mamma!" And she took the boy in her arms and followed her mistress.

Heinz walked back to his room. He could have asserted his authority, but he shrank from the scene that would have followed and the ever-repeated reproach that he alone was to blame for her miserable existence. If he had loved he would have made some attempt to restrain her, but from a species of

cowardice he preferred, instead, to avoid provoking the scenes that were so repugnant to him. He reproached himself daily for this cowardice, and yet he knew that he would continue in it until the end.

Ah, how distinctly he remembered every petty incident of that day—the uneasiness that tortured him and sent him from window to window to look out at the coming storm. He had gone down through the leaden heat that was not relieved by a single breath of air to see his sister. He found her with a severe headache in her room, which she had made more attractive with some of her own possessions brought from her old home. She was lying on the sofa; the oldest girl was taking a music lesson in the sitting-room, and the sharp tones penetrated even here; in one corner of the apartment the boy was making attempts to write on a slate. Mariechen was playing with her dolls.

“What weather, Heinz!” said Hede, as her brother entered. “And you have come down in the very midst of the heat. Didn’t you remember that you would have that long climb back?”

“Yes, I remembered. But let me stay here awhile. I am fearfully uneasy; Toni has gone out driving with the boy, and I am afraid that the storm will overtake them on the way home.”

Hede made no reply; she knew her sister-in-law, she knew her brother, and the whole unhappy story of their marriage.

“Auntie,” cried Mariechen, looking up from her playthings, “listen to the thunder.”

Indeed the air was filled with a long, low rumble,

loud enough at times to make the panes rattle, and at the same moment a strange, yellow glare lighted the windows.

"Don't be alarmed, Heinz; the Gräfin is far too sensible to let Toni start for home before the storm has past."

"Yes, yes!" was the absent reply, as he walked to the window and looked out at the square, filled with the yellow light. "But I think I had better go back again; there's no telling what may happen."

He pressed her hand and left her. Outside everything seemed changed; the castle walls were a glaring white against the black sky; the trees dark and motionless except for a slight quivering in the topmost branches, as if they were anxiously awaiting the coming storm.

Instead of returning directly to the castle, Heinz had taken the road that led through the park and by which the carriage must return. It was almost dark and wholly deserted. He had seated himself mechanically on a bench, and waited for the catastrophe which, he told himself, must come. He blamed himself for his fears, but his excited nerves returned persistently to the idea that something had happened to the child.

Before he knew it the storm had burst; a howling tempest that hurled him like a wisp of straw against one of the century old trees, a cloud of dust that blinded him, a roaring and crashing in the heavens, then a short, blinding flash, a deafening peal of thunder, and a torrent of rain.

He had clung to the tree with both arms, like one

stunned, then he seemed to hear through the tumult the sound of stamping and trampling, a piercing outcry for help. As he staggered forward he had seen in the glare of a second flash a fallen horse, another plunging wildly, a wrecked carriage, and something white under the wheels, something white and still. He had dashed forward; he did not know to this day how, in that inky blackness, he had found the tiny white object, how he had held it to his heart under his dripping coat, how he had staggered forward in the drenching rain without heeding the shrill cries of terror that sounded behind him.

Toni still lived, at all events—what he held in his arms was motionless, dead, wilfully sacrificed.

The rain ran in streams from his clothing as he stumbled into the doctor's house, hatless, with wild eyes and blanched face, and held out to him the small, tender, childish body that lay limp and lifeless in his arms.

A terrible fifteen minutes passed before the little one gave any sign of life. Regardless of his drenched clothes, Heinz had not stirred from the doctor's side, and had followed every effort with a sinking heart. Then the footman had appeared with the message that Mrs. von Kerkow had become hysterical from fright, and wished the governor to return with the child at once.

Heinz made no reply, but the doctor sent word that Mrs. von Kerkow had better drink a cup of tea and go to bed; as to her seeing her child again, alive, it was doubtful.

Heinz had gripped the old physician by the arm.

"Doctor——" he groaned.

"Control yourself, sir. I will do what I can."

A few hours later, Heinz, accompanied by Doctor May, had borne the moaning child, wrapped in woollen coverings, up to the castle, laid him in his bed, and sat down to watch. He had sprung up like a madman when Toni entered, enveloped in an elaborate dressing-gown, and ready to break into hysterical weeping at any moment. He seized her roughly by the arm, led her from the room, and locked the door behind her. He knew that it was brutal in him, but he could not see her face to face with the misery she had wrought.

For weeks and months he tended the child who could have almost reconciled him to life at this woman's side—almost, if it had only remained strong or become strong again. But complete recovery did not come, nor would it ever, and a gulf opened between the husband and wife that no bridge could span. Since the scene at the child's bedside, Toni had made no endeavor to take the blame upon herself, and had found no word of regret or of self-reproach. With her acquaintances she found no lack of excuses for her conduct, but she dared make none to Heinz. The two passed each other by like shadows. She could scarcely bear to look at the suffering and often impatient child.

One day when she entered her husband's room upon a matter that necessitated her speaking with him, and came up behind his chair to the writing table, she saw at his side the little carriage with the child.

She briefly asked him a question and received a brief answer; she could have gone, but she wanted something more; to ask Heinz whether he would accompany her to Brendenburg, the nearest Prussian county seat, to a masked ball which the officers of cuirassiers stationed there were about to give, and to which it was impossible, unfortunately, for her to go alone.

He turned and looked at her with indignation.

"I do not feel in a mood for balls," he answered, with a gesture toward the child.

"Indeed!" she said coldly. "It is a terrible misfortune, I know, but one can't go about with a long face all one's life."

"If you feel like that, why not go?"

"I cannot go alone, and you know it. It is your duty to accompany me."

"It is my duty to stay with the poor, little unfortunate whom you have condemned to a life of suffering by your self-will. This, at present, is the only duty I recognize."

The sick child, startled perhaps by the stern tone, began to scream. Toni's violent retort was drowned by its cries. She darted with flashing eyes toward the boy and bade him angrily to be quiet, at the same time slapping the wasted little hand.

He stopped crying in speechless terror; his eyes grew fixed and almost disappeared under the lids; the tiny face quivered convulsively. Heinz sprang forward like an infuriated tiger, and, seizing his wife by the shoulders, shook her as he would a sapling.

"Are you human," he cried through his set teeth "are you a woman?"

Then he released her, so that she staggered and fell, and flinging himself upon his knees beside the carriage, he buried his face in his hands and broke into fierce sobbing.

By night the little one's attack had passed, but from that hour Heinz Kerkow buried deep in his heart all his former longings for freedom, and for a life that was full of great and noble aspirations.

He could not work during this sad period. He realized more and more clearly that his son would always be a cripple. He would never be fitted for any profession; all he needed was some one to watch over and care for him. This thought drove Heinz from his desk, from his new labors to the bedside of his son.

Then, one gloomy, rainy day, had come another trial. Men had made their appearance with carts and boxes to take the Breitenfels collection of books to the capital. Heinz looked on as the volumes were being packed, and he felt as though he were parting from old and tried friends. He needed all his self-control to keep from breaking down and crying like a child.

When, a few days later, he walked through the empty and desolate rooms of the library, he felt that his inner life too had grown empty and desolate. His first writings had been part truth, part fiction, but they had been founded upon historical research. Without these sources of information he could work no longer.

Why did fate pursue him with such relentless persistence? In his youth, he had had to put aside his own inclinations, he had had to tear his one great love from his heart, to sacrifice himself uselessly for his mother and sisters. His self-abnegation had seemed about to be made up to him; he would live again in his son; in vain! Fate pursued him still—what use to struggle against its gloomy power?

He now existed only for his crippled boy. If the child were to die life would become impossible to him. He took scarcely any interest in what was happening in the world outside; the papers often remained unopened; he no longer went to the club rooms at the hotel—he stayed at home with Heini, untiringly cutting out playthings for him, telling him stories; and of late there had come to him the idea of painting the child in the midst of the blossoming shrubs and the fresh green foliage of spring.

So his life slipped by. He knew that his wife went out a great deal, but it was all one to him. He knew that the duke had said the previous autumn, “Kerkow has gone all to pieces; I wouldn’t know him; I am sorry for his wife; she has quite blossomed out and has grown really agreeable.”

Yes, the duke was right; he knew it, but it made no impression upon him.

“He is mad,” Toni would say to Frau von Gruber. “He has grown absolutely unbearable. Of course it would have been better if I had not gone on that drive, but it’s done now and I can’t undo it.”

This thought was now in her mind as she and one of the daughters of the Gräfin Arnstein came through

the Gothic doorway that opened upon the terrace. The countess had had some errands in the town and had come to pay a hasty visit to her dear Mrs. Kerkow ; she had brought a little Chinese dragon on a long string for Heini. Toni, in a gown of pale blue linen with silk sleeves and a broad lace collar, would hardly have been recognized as the Toni of a few years before, had it not been for her pale, cold blue eyes. When she saw Heinz, they grew even colder and harder.

The countess was an amiable young woman ; she had some comprehension of the sufferings of the man who advanced to meet her. With a few pleasant words, she sat down opposite him and began to chat. She had just been to Berlin with her father, she said, and from there they had gone to Dresden, where she had revelled in music.

“ And just think, Herr von Kerkow, just think, Toni—of course you remember little Aenne May, the old doctor’s daughter ? Well, I heard her sing—it was magnificent ! Dresden has gone wild over her. Naturally, I was interested to learn more about her. I looked up her address and went to see her. I climbed up four flights to a tidy apartment on the top floor ; a very young maid servant opened the door, but Miss May was not at home, unfortunately. A white-haired old lady appeared, however, and invited me in, and when she heard that I was a countrywoman of her niece, she opened her arms and her heart to me. Such marvellous success as the girl has had ! The manager was bound to secure her for the court theatre, but she will not sing anywhere but in

concert. Think of it, such an offer upon her first appearance in public ! She has accepted an immense number of engagements, even as far away as St. Petersburg, and yet she has given up two great concerts because she wishes to sing at the festival at Brendenburg. I believe," added the countess, "that it is to be at the end of the month. She wants her parents to hear her, the aunt told me. Her teachers idolize her ; such a rich, full voice as she has, and such iron determination, such devotion to her work ! Indeed, I went away from that modest little top floor room much affected, and I thought to myself that I had just seen the embodiment of the kind of good fortune one reads of in fairy tales."

Heinz was gazing with unseeing eyes at the brilliant landscape that lay basking in the slanting sunlight.

"The good fortune one reads of in fairy tales," he murmured to himself. "Good luck to you, little Aenne ! Your lot—and mine !"

"I have just been to the bookseller's to get a song I had ordered some time ago," the countess went on. "Aenne May sang it at a great concert given in Dresden, but the man had never heard of it and I could learn nothing about it ; it cannot have been published. I wonder if you happen to know it, Herr Kerkow ? I can still remember a few lines :—

"Oh, crimson glow of the sinking sun,
How magic thy spell upon hill and dale."

He smiled sadly.

"Yes, I know it," he answered, quietly.

"The words were strange to me, too. Who wrote them? Do you know?" the countess inquired.

"I do not know," he answered.

He would not have admitted for the world that he was the author.

But before his eyes rose the vision of one sunshine-steeped summer afternoon; of himself stretched out in the heather in the clearing, and of her beside him, gazing into the violet and purple distance, her arms clasped about her knees, a look of rapt exaltation on her fair young face.

"There!" he had suddenly exclaimed, and handed her a page from his note-book on which he had been scribbling. And she had read it. He did not know whether it was the sun that suddenly dyed her cheeks crimson, or the warm, tell-tale blood.

And then she had sung his words to her favorite air. And the sun had set.

"Can any one go to the concert?" Toni asked in her expressionless voice.

"Why, of course, Toni—we shall all be there. Shall I secure a seat for you with us? Or shall you go with your husband?"

"With me? No, I regret that I cannot be present," Heinz answered with curt decision.

"As usual!" remarked Toni, with a significant look at the countess that meant: "You see what my life is." "Then I shall have to ask your mother to take pity on an unprotected woman. I am obliged to make so many demands upon her good-nature."

The countess remained silent, but looked search-

ingly at the white face of the man opposite her and then down at the child, and she thought she understood.

"Good-bye, Herr von Kerkow," she said with unusual warmth of manner and giving him her hand. "My carriage is waiting at the park gate, and I shall be defrauding your little boy if I keep you from him any longer. Good-bye, Heini! Don't forget me! What shall I bring you next time?"

But the child only shook his head.

"Nothing, thank you," he answered.

"You are polite, I must say!" said Toni, with a laugh. "This is the result of Heinz's bringing up. Why nothing, you little barbarian? Don't you like the pretty toy?"

The little invalid returned his mother's angry look with big, wondering eyes.

"Yes; but it can fly about, and it looks so happy," he said, "though it's nothing but bright paper, and I am a boy, and—I can't. I don't like to look at it."

Toni shrugged her shoulders; she did not understand the terrible bitterness that lay in the child's words.

The countess' lips quivered; she nodded again to Heinz, who took leave of her with a low bow, and then crossed the terrace at Toni's side and disappeared behind the jasmine bushes. Heinz stooped down and stroked the little one's forehead.

"You mustn't grow bitter, my darling, you mustn't grow bitter," he murmured. "And we have each other to love, haven't we?"

"Yes, papa," the child answered.

Heinz carefully pushed the chair toward the arched doorway that led to the castle court, and, on reaching the entrance to the opposite wing, he raised the maimed little body tenderly from the pillows and carried it up the stairs.

At the door of the guard-house, and watching the little scene, was standing the lieutenant who had been in command of the garrison for some weeks. Then he lounged slowly across the courtyard and out upon the terrace that Heinz had just left, turned to the right and entered the duchess' garden, and, seating himself in the dusky little summer-house, leaned back as though waiting for some one.

"Deuce take it!" he muttered. "This tiresome hole is enough to drive a fellow to anything!" He was a handsome man with well-cut but expressionless features and a fine figure. He was evidently in an exceedingly bad humor, but suddenly his expression changed to an insipid smile. "Aha!" he exclaimed in an undertone.

Short hurried steps sounded without, the rustle of silken skirts, and the figure of a woman in a pale blue gown appeared at the entrance to the arbor.

"You here, Lieutenant Grellert?" she exclaimed with well-feigned surprise.

"Forgive me, if I am in the way, gracious madam," he answered. "I—shall I go, or——"

He remained. And meanwhile Heinz put the little invalid to bed with the help of the maid, and then sat waiting for his wife by the window in the dining-room. The table was laid, the flame burned

bright under the tea-kettle, Aunt Gruber appeared in one of the black damask gowns that she had inherited from the duchess. She moved softly about the room, glanced at the clock from time to time, and suppressed a yawn. Heinz paid no heed to the lateness of the hour or to what was passing around him ; he saw only a slight, girlish figure and heard a sweet voice,—

“ Oh, sun, oh, love, how cold without thee ! ”

What had he known then of the truth of these words ? Had it been a premonition of coming misfortune that had inspired them ?

The door opened hastily and Toni entered.

“ Feodora had so much to talk about,” she began in breathless excuse, before any one reproached her.

They seated themselves at the table more silently than was their custom, for Aunt Gruber, who usually carried on a brisk conversation with the younger woman, could to-day get no answer to her remarks.

CHAPTER XX.

MAY was wholly gone, beautiful with its scent of flowers, its warm, dark nights filled with the music of the nightingales. So loud and melancholy was their song that the man who lay stretched beside his sick child's crib could not sleep, and when he did fall asleep at last, it was to dream again those sweet dreams that he had once hoped to realize in his waking hours.

In the head forester's garden, too, the melting, long-drawn notes came from the hazel bushes close to Hedwig Kerkow's window. The children in the room near by slept soundly, but Hedwig would sit at her window half the night through, thinking of Heinz and weeping for him, not knowing that she was weeping for herself as well, in restless though unconscious sadness. On this night also, two days before the music festival which had thrown the little town into a fever of excitement, she was sitting looking sadly out into the darkness. It was absurd of her to cry; she could not alter Heinz's fate thereby, and as for her, her lines had fallen in pleasant places; she had a home, a position in which she enjoyed absolute freedom; the master of the house treated her with the same deferential kindness with which he had received her on the day of her arrival.

Once or twice he had spoken a few embarrassed words of thanks, when she had nursed the children night and day through a severe epidemic of scarlet fever. It had been scarcely more than a murmured word, a pressure of the hand, but his eyes had been moist. For the rest, he seemed like an automaton, and sat in his den, as he jestingly called his study, alone as before.

But towards evening, at twilight, he would come across to the sitting-room, seat himself silently in a corner of the sofa, and listen to Hedwig's playing. She was not a skilled musician, but her touch was light, and her soft alto mingled pleasantly with the clear, fresh voices of the children when they sang the old folk-songs that his mother had once sung.

Before the last tones died away, he would disappear. Thus he lived on, seeming to miss nothing, and to be content in his quiet, monotonous round of life. And whenever Hede glanced after him covertly in the mornings as he went off into the woods, his gun over his shoulder, straight and sturdy as the oaks in the Walderod forest of which he was so proud, she could not help comparing him with Heinz, who had grown bent during the past years, as though he were already standing on the threshold of old age—poor Heinz!

Hede went up to the castle but seldom; the relations between herself and her sister-in-law and aunt had in no way improved. These visits were always a torment to her. She would return miserably unhappy, and it would be days before she recovered her equilibrium. In the town, the unhappy mar-

riage was the talk of every idle tongue, both masculine and feminine. In consequence, Hede, who at her brother's and Günther's desire had at first associated with several of the ladies of the town, had almost wholly withdrawn from their society. To the doctor's wife alone she would still slip over occasionally.

She had been to see her early that very morning, and Mrs. May had been bustling about the house more energetically than ever. There was a new expression in her face; her round cheeks were pale, and her mouth quivered as she stood by the press, taking out her finest table linen.

"You must excuse me, Miss Kerkow," she said to Hede. "Aenne and Emilie may be here at seven o'clock, and I have so much to attend to. That stupid thing, Line, doesn't even know how to pick a pigeon, and such stupidity about preparing asparagus I never saw! Do you suppose such a creature would know how to twine wreaths? I must attend to everything myself. But go in and see my husband; he is reading the paper, and there is something in it about Aenne."

"I can read it at home, Mrs. May," said Hede. "I am going to help you make your wreaths now." And it was not long before she was seated with her greens and flowers on a bench outside the kitchen. The old doctor was standing before her, and behind her was Mrs. May looking out of the kitchen window, and back of Mrs. May the maid-servant stood listening, for the doctor was reading aloud from the paper. Hede managed to catch every word, although

the old gentleman choked and cleared his throat after nearly every sentence, and the old lady behind her kept exclaiming at each particularly enthusiastic paragraph, "Now, May, May!" to which he would answer, "Why, mother, I didn't write it!"

A star in the world of art, she was called, a singer for whom a great future was in store. Her depth of comprehension, her earnestness, her fulness of tone, were unrivalled, and the only pity was that the young girl should persist in her refusal to appear upon the operatic stage. It was most phenomenal that an unknown graduate of the conservatory should have aroused such a storm of enthusiasm upon her first appearance, and it was to be hoped that the persuasions of the manager of one of the leading court theatres would finally induce her to enter upon a stage career.

No one spoke when the doctor had finished; at last he said, "And this is our Aenne, wife—our Aenne!" But the mother could not speak, and turned away from the window, weeping silently.

And all day long Hedwig had been thinking about this girl into whose lap fortune had flung such lavish gifts, talent, youth, and beauty. What if she had remained here as Günther's wife—a caged nightingale?

She was at home now in her father's house, and doubtless sleeping the sweet sleep of her childhood days. Had she a thought of the man with whom she had broken her troth?

Ah, Aenne was sleeping as little as Hedwig Kerkow, and as Heinz at the bedside of his child.

She, too, was standing by the window, her eyes upturned to the castle. She had come home loaded down with success greater than she had ever dared dream of ; she had not grasped it herself as yet ; her delicacy, her modesty, still shrank from the clamorous plaudits that overwhelmed her on every side, and in this stillness, in the spell of this solitude, she felt as though it were all a dream, and that she was standing here as she had once stood in the only happy period of her life, looking up at the light that had once been the guiding-star of her existence.

Ah, no, she had not been able to forget it ! The recollection of it followed her always, wherever she might go. The pain, indeed, had grown less violent in the great world outside, in passionate striving toward the lofty goal, but it was always there ; she was ever conscious of it. How might things be faring with Heinz ? And should she see him here ?

Not until toward morning did she fall asleep ; she was broad awake again before dawn, and when the homely landscape lay beneath her in the smiling, early morning sunshine, so green, so fresh, so sweet and pleasant when the exhilarating mountain air fanned her cheek as she looked out of the window, she could remain within no longer, and hurriedly putting on her gray travelling gown and her garden hat, which was still hanging in its place, she slipped out of the house and into the castle garden. She took the old, dusky paths she loved so well, and where she had spent some of the happiest and the saddest hours of her life, and came at last to the famous linden avenue in the ducal gardens. Ah,

how beautiful, how beautiful it was at home ! And so quiet, so deliciously peaceful ! How she had missed the close communion with nature in her busy life in Dresden ! How she had longed for the breath of the woods in her fourth floor rooms ! And yet the air there was the best the city afforded ; it came across from the "*Grosse Garten*," and in the spring there was actually at times a faint perfume of syringas which made her almost sick with longing for home.

Yes, the years that lay behind Aenne May had been hard ones, for Aunt Emilie's capital and her scanty widow's pension were not equal to the demands of a great city. But these hardships had done her no harm. She had grown taller, her figure was erect and alert, and even if her face had lost something of its childish roundness, it had gained in nobility and charm.

Aenne walked on, nodding to every old friend among the trees, the lindens, the beeches, the weeping willows by the pond. The tame doe came at her call as it had been wont to do, and looked at her with its brown, trusting eyes.

It was all as it had been, and so beautiful, so beautiful !

And Heinz ? She had not ventured to ask about him. In response to an uncontrollable impulse, she had once added a postscript to one of her letters to her parents, "How are things going with the Kerkows ? Are they still in Breitenfels ? But she had not been able to bring herself to send the letter as it was, and had scratched out the question so that it

could not possibly be deciphered. No one had written to her about Heinz or about Günther. Three years before, when she had come home at Christmas, for the only time during her studies, she had heard Heinz spoken of, so he had still been there then. She had also learned that Hedwig Kerkow had taken charge of the head forester's house; she had not seen either the brother or the sister, and she was too proud to make inquiries about the former.

She had removed her hat and walked on, holding it carelessly in her hand, her head down. The first grass had been cut from the lawns; the air was wonderfully in harmony with the spirit of spring. Without knowing it, she had thus approached the Luisenschlösschen and was about to walk past as usual toward the path that led to the outermost limits of the park. She stopped in surprise. The half-ruinous building had been repaired; it had been freshly painted and stood out quite smartly from among the dark firs that formed a semicircle around it. The ground-floor seemed to be inhabited, for snowy curtains hung at the high windows. A woman appeared at one of them for a moment and took a hasty survey of Aenne; otherwise everything was unnaturally still. Upon the open space freshly strewn with gravel were the marks of narrow wheels which lost themselves within the garden; the latter, enclosed as it was by a new paling, must have been very lately laid out as a private garden for the inmates of the Luisenschlösschen.

Aenne followed the wheel tracks and looked over the paling. Under a great beech that shaded a

newly-erected arbor in the right-hand corner of the garden stood the little carriage whose tracks she had been following. Against the white pillows lay a sallow little face about which curled silky golden hair. At the side of a carriage knelt a woman holding up a glass of frothing milk to the child's lips. The fingers that clasped the cup were painfully wasted and transparent.

"Aren't you ever going to finish it, Heini?" asked the red-cheeked nurse, roughly. "My knees are black and blue with kneeling so long."

The little fellow stopped drinking at once, pushed aside the glass and the nurse's hand, and turned his face away, a poor, pale, patient face. Aenne saw the woman rise and heard the angry words,—

"If you weren't such a pitiful little heap of misfortune, I would give your hands a good slapping, you naughty boy."

Aenne felt the blood rising to her cheeks. The next instant she was in the garden and standing before the dismayed nurse.

"Whose child is this?" she demanded, resolved to tell the parents how their little one was treated in their absence.

She supposed that the child belonged to some family from Berlin or Magdeburg who had come to Breitenfels with the little patient for the sake of the pure air.

The nurse made no reply, but looked at the indignant young lady, half in confusion, half in defiance.

"What is your name, dear?" asked Aenne, bend-

ing over the boy. "Do you live here?" she went on, stroking the golden hair.

"Heini Kerkow," he answered, and, as Aenne started suddenly, he asked, "Did you hurt yourself?"

"No," she answered, as she knelt down beside the wheeled chair. "No, Heini."

"What are you crying for, then?" the child persisted.

"I am not crying, darling. I am only glad to see you. Shall I give you your milk now?"

"Yes," was the answer.

She told the nurse to fill the cup afresh and held it to his lips while she supported the heavy head. The boy drank very slowly in short sips. Aenne struggled with her emotion. So this was Heinz Kerkow's child!

"Thank you," the little fellow said, at last, and he looked at her with his big eyes as though in wonder at her kindness.

"Heini must go home now," declared the nurse, red with anger, and stepping behind the carriage. "His papa comes as far as the stone seat every morning to meet us, and he is anxious if we are not punctual."

"Good-bye, dear child," said Aenne, tenderly; and she left the garden in advance of the nurse and her charge.

It seemed to her in the face of this suffering that the sky had suddenly grown less blue, the sun less brilliant. Her joy at being home again had vanished, her radiant face had grown pale. Her eyes rested questioningly upon the wilderness of green—

why did God permit such suffering in this beautiful, joyous world?

She came to a halt abruptly. She had been walking so rapidly that she had not noticed that she was close upon the "tea house." The little Japanese pavilion which lay at the extreme end of the park owed its existence and its name to the late duke, who at the beginning of his illness had been in the habit of spending hours here in the solitude. A cupboard within had once held the necessary appliances for making a cup of tea, which the duke was accustomed to prepare for himself. When this whim had given place to another the little building had been deserted, and save for some workman who took his nooning there, Aenne was the only one who visited it.

To-day there was a sound of voices within. A petulant, "Very well, we shall see. Good-bye!" and a dainty figure clad in light blue appeared in the doorway and sped down the path that led toward the pond. The sunlight fell upon the hair that was arranged in a knot at the back of the head, the dull, flaxen hair that Aenne knew so well, that she had last seen under the bridal veil on the day of Heinz Kerkow's marriage.

"Toni Ribbeneck—Toni Kerkow!" she murmured.

And behind her, laughing and twirling his moustache, came a tall, young officer and followed her down the path. He was in undress uniform, wore his cap on one side as a ublan wears his shako, and was swinging a riding switch in his hand.

Aenne stared after him, dazed, one hand pressed against the trunk of a birch tree. Had she seen aright? Suddenly her face grew crimson, she snatched up her hat, which had fallen to the ground, and walked hastily away in the opposite direction as though the air in the neighborhood of the little pavilion were contaminated. Not until she reached the boundaries of the grounds and saw the windows of her home, did the feeling of shame and disgust that had seized her disappear. But her face was disturbed when she entered the dining-room, where her mother was setting on the table the coffee service over which played the sunlight that filtered through the young leaves of the chestnut trees.

Aunt Emilie was standing by the open window feeding the hens; she had long been obliged to forego this pleasure.

"So you've been wandering about in the park again," grumbled Mrs. May, cutting the cake that she had baked expressly for Aenne. "Am I to have a kiss or not?"

"Two, little mother! I had such a longing to see the old garden."

"The garden has remained just as it was," said Mrs. May, "but a good many other things have been changed."

"How are things with Heinz Kerkow?" asked Aenne in a low voice, looking at Aunt Emilie, who was throwing the last crumbs to the hens.

"Kerkow?" Mrs. May shrugged her shoulders and after rearranging the cups and saucers, added.

"Oh he has become overbearing toward all outsiders, and——"

"And," prompted Aenne.

"And at home he has turned nursemaid."

"Has he several children?"

"Only one, luckily, the little cripple, who owes his misfortune to his own mother."

Aenne drew a breath of relief. The poor little fellow had a father, at least, who loved him! And she seated herself silently at the familiar board.

"Poor Heinz!" she kept repeating to herself.
"Poor Heinz."

CHAPTER XXI.

Mrs. von KERKOW was ready, dressed in an evening toilet of pale lilac silk, the carriage was at the door, and she was waiting only for Mrs. von Gruber. The great musical festival in the neighboring town of Brendenburg was to be held that night. Heinz had, of course, refused her request, when she asked him to be her escort, without vouchsafing any explanation, the Arnsteins had gone into mourning, and the young wife had had to look around for some other chaperon, for of course it would not do for her to drive three miles through the country alone with Lieutenant Grellert and return with him late at night. Toni had, therefore, besieged Mrs. von Gruber with every cajolery she could think of, in order to gain her end.

The old lady had had serious misgivings as to her health, but yielded finally to the younger woman's entreaties.

It was about five o'clock and the afternoon was warm. Toni stood at the window counting the carriages that were already rolling up the street, the families of the superintendent and the oberamtmann, in a break, the pensioned officials in the hotel omnibus, the Mays in a landau. Of course the whole May family would be present, since the daughter was to sing the principal part. Where could Aunt Gru-

ber be, or rather Aunt Gruber's maid, who should announce that her mistress was ready? Toni had already taken leave of her husband and the child; Heinz was doubtless sitting somewhere in the park with the boy, in his character of nursemaid.

She sighed impatiently and frowned: it was terrible to be chained to such a man.

At last there came a knock, and Mrs. von Gruber's maid entered.

Her gracious lady begged that Mrs. von Kerkow would not be angry, but it was impossible that she should accompany her. Her mistress had had a fainting attack, brought on no doubt by the heat."

Toni turned very pale.

"Tell Friedrich to find the governor," she ordered, "and say to my aunt that I am very sorry, and that I hope she will soon feel better. Take good care of your mistress; I cannot go to her myself, unfortunately. Tell Friedrich to hurry: he will probably find his master near the little pavilion, with Heini."

A few moments later, Heinz made his appearance. Toni was standing in the middle of the room, near a small table on which was a glass bowl filled with white roses. Coming out of the bright sunshine into the dim light of the shaded room, Heinz was blinded for a moment and the excitement in his wife's face escaped him.

"There is something you wish of me?" he asked, wearily.

"Yes," she said. "You must accompany me to Brandenburg; dress quickly, please, or we shall miss the beginning of the concert."

"I must accompany you? Why?"

"Because I cannot go alone with Lieutenant Grellert."

"You intend then to take him in your carriage? I did not know it."

"You have forgotten it. You were present when I invited him a few days ago. Aunt Gruber has been taken ill, and I ask you to go with me, surely it is simple enough!"

"I shall not go," he answered, quietly. "If you are bent upon going, then ask Hede to accompany you; but I think it would be best for you to remain at home. "I am worried about Heini; he is decidedly feverish, and if Aunt Gruber is ill, as you say——"

"Then I will go with Lieutenant Grellert alone," she interrupted, taking up her sunshade together with a number of Mareschal Niel roses and going to one of the great mirrors as though to make a final survey of her toilet.

Heinz saw how the bonnet-strings that were tied at her chin were quivering, and how her fingers were shaking as she attempted to fasten the roses at her belt.

"You shall not," he said quietly.

She wheeled about as though a snake had bitten her.

"I—I am not to do as I please? You presume to forbid me——"

"Yes, I forbid you to drive to Brandenburg with Lieutenant Grellert."

She gave a short laugh and her eyes flashed.

"As long as you are my wife, I forbid it; I have no desire to play the rôle of a deceived husband."

"As long as I am your wife?" she burst out.

He nodded and touched the bell.

She laid her parasol upon the table again.

"How interesting!" she exclaimed, shrilly. "Are you going to give me no explanation?"

"In a moment. I wish to give Friedrich some orders first."

The footman appeared at the door.

"Find Lieutenant Grellert and tell him that the carriage is at his disposal; Frau von Kerkow is unable to go to the concert, as Mrs. von Gruber is indisposed and the child is ill."

Toni leaned with folded arms against a cabinet and stared at her husband; her pallid, insignificant face was actually repulsive.

"Well?" she asked, as the servant closed the door behind him.

"I have been wishing for some time to speak to you in regard to your intercourse with Lieutenant Grellert, but I disliked to touch upon the subject. The present opportunity is so favorable, however, that I would beg to ask what you mean by your intimacy with him, and where you expect to end?"

"I am sorry," she answered, "but you speak in riddles; you must express yourself more clearly."

He was silent for a moment.

"You and this man are almost inseparable," he went on. "You walk with him in the park in the morning, he is in your saloon during your reception hours, he takes his five o'clock tea under my roof if

he does not meet you at the house of some acquaintance or on the tennis court, and of late he would seem to be a regular guest at my table. This familiar intercourse may be very pleasant for the young man, in view of the dullness of his life here, but it annoys me; I am not always in the mood to talk to a stranger and to play the polite host. For this reason I would like to know why you show him such marked favor and have taken him so completely under your protection. If your reasons are sufficiently convincing, you may be sure that I shall not interfere with your wishes."

Her eyes had narrowed as she watched him, trying to ascertain whether or not he were speaking sarcastically; but his face was only very grave and very indifferent.

"What do you mean?" she demanded. "What are my wishes? Reasons? I have no reasons. Absurd! It is hardly in keeping with your conduct to pretend jealousy now."

"Jealousy? Scarcely that! I merely do not intend to let you trifle with my honor, and therefore I beg you to be quite frank with me. Believe me, I am as keenly alive to the misery of our position as you are, but as long as we are bound to each other, I do not mean to let any breath of scandal touch you. I do not blame you for longing for your freedom, and if you will say to me now, 'Release me, I want to marry Lieutenant Grellert,' I——"

She stood suddenly before him, pale, trembling, and yet with a laugh on her colorless and quivering lips.

"It is not as simple as all that—not as simple; with the best will in the world, I cannot do you that favor! Lieutenant Grellert will not be the one to take me off your hands; he does not please me in the least; he is a nonentity in every respect. I talk to him so as to keep from dying in the deadly monotony of my life; he is the only one at hand, and I do not intend to let you forbid my doing as I please. I do not forbid your burying yourself in your recollections of the past and indulging in fresh hopes; or do you suppose that I was stricken with blindness when you married me, and could not see the state of your heart?"

He looked past the angry woman as though she were not there, then he passed his hand over his forehead like one awakening from a deep sleep.

"What should I do with my freedom?" he asked quietly. "But I shall see to it that the woman who bears my name does not imperil her honor. And for this reason"—he had gradually raised his voice—"for this reason I forbid your unworthy trifling with Lieutenant Grellert."

"And if I do not respect your command? If I say that I know nothing of any 'trifling'? If I refuse to be treated like a school-girl?"

He was silent.

"I shall be shut up, I suppose? I shall not be allowed to eat at table? I shall even be made to go hungry, perhaps?" she cried scornfully, fumbling at her bonnet strings.

When she had finally loosened them, she tossed the dainty creation of lilac blossoms and lace upon

the table and flung herself into a chair, glaring at her husband like an animal at bay.

"There are other means left me," he answered.

"Heavens, how romantic! A duel?" she cried.
"Poor Grellert!"

But she stopped with a start; a shiver passed over her, and her mouth grew dry. She had remembered a day a few weeks before, when the two men had been practising with pistols in the park, and her husband had aimed at a playing card, saying, "Now for the ace of hearts," and the tiny red heart had indeed been shot away from its white setting. But even so, would he be man enough to turn his skill to account? Ah, how she hated him, how abhorrent he was to her, this pallid man with the quiet face and the weary, sunken eyes!

He was still standing by the fireplace, slowly stroking the full beard that he now wore, and which made him appear even older, his glance wandering listlessly over the carpet. An old man at the beginning of the thirties, the caricature of a man, without energy, without strength, she said to herself as she surveyed him contemptuously. He would once have flown into a passion—but now? It was all pure bravado when he talked of other means!

A prolonged pause ensued; the only sound was the low ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece and the rustle of the young wife's gown. At last she could bear it no longer.

"You can rest on your laurels now," she began acidly. "You can congratulate yourself upon having had your own way and deprived me of one more

pleasure. I should go now, if I were you ; you will fall asleep otherwise, and you forget that Heini is alone."

"I am going," he answered coldly, "but Heini is not alone. Hedwig is with him ; she came a short time ago and is awaiting my return. I regret that you should have had to give up the concert, but I think that on reflection you will see that I am right. You have been warned."

"Of course," she retorted, "right—as usual ! And I am also warned——"

But he did not hear the rest ; he was already gone.

Hedwig was sitting patiently by the child's wheeled chair under the chestnuts, through whose leaves the sunbeams flickered.

"How pale you are !" she said, when he was seated opposite her again, and, with his hand on the little one's fair head, was gazing absently into the distance.

"It's only your imagination, Hede ; and yet it is possible. Aunt Gruber is ill and I am anxious about her ; I am so easily alarmed nowadays, like a nervous old maid," he added with a dreary smile.

Hede looked at him sadly.

"You should have gone, Heinz," she said. "I could have taken care of Heini."

His color changed.

"Nonsense !" he returned sharply.

"You are right, Heinz, you are nervous," declared his sister, rising. "And if this continues——"

"That is my affair," was the equally sharp rejoinder.

"Has Toni gone?" asked Hede, overlooking the irritable reply.

"No!"

"Is she with Aunt Gruber?"

"I do not know," he answered impatiently.

"Good-bye, then, Heinz—you had better be alone," she said.

He held out his hand.

"Do not be angry, Hede; I have so much to trouble me!"

"I am not angry, Heinz. Besides, I am not accustomed to have people control their feelings on my account," she said with a smile.

He sprang up and looked at her in contrition; she returned the look quietly, the tears rising to her gray eyes.

"My poor Hede!" he said, drawing her to him.

"I am very well off, Heinz, too well off," she protested, eagerly. "I want for nothing!"

He shook his head.

"No nothing but a little sunshine—we had pictured things so differently. But there is no use talking about it—you are right! Come, Heini, we will go home with auntie, through the park."

He took his place behind the little carriage, and the brother and sister sauntered slowly through the deserted garden. At the stables they separated, Hede going in the direction of the head forester's house, Heinz taking the shortest way back to the castle with the little invalid.

"Are you angry, papa?" the child asked as his father sat moodily by the bedside, after the nurse

had undressed the little fellow, brought him his milk and heard him say his prayers.

"No, my boy ; what makes you think so ?"

"Because you are not telling me any stories to-night."

"I will begin at once, Heini ; I thought you were tired."

"I am, papa. And aren't you, too?"

"Yes, Heini, I am tired too."

"Then you mustn't tell me any stories to-night, not until to-morrow. But please don't forget where you left off, Papa—the young knight was just starting out on his journey to look for the beautiful princess, and his doublet was of blue velvet and his armor was all silver, and he had a golden sun on his breast."

"I won't forget, Heini."

"Will he find her, papa ?"

"I hope so, Heini."

"I know what she looks like, papa."

"Do you ?"

"Yes, like the lady who gave me my milk yesterday morning—she was so kind, and her eyes were so bright, and she cried, too, just like the princess."

Heinz took the child's hand ; he thought he must be wandering ; but Heini's eyes were clear and calm as they looked up at him in the subdued light of the shaded lamp.

The nurse came in again with a glass of lemonade, which the boy liked to sip during the night.

"Who was the lady who spoke to Heini yesterday in the park ?" inquired Heinz.

"I didn't know her at first," stammered the woman in confusion, "but I asked the forester's wife afterward, and she said it must have been Doctor May's daughter."

He nodded and turned to the child.

"Go to sleep, my darling," he said, with an effort.

"She was so kind," the little fellow repeated, "and she cried over me, Papa."

Then he lay quite still, and after a while his eyes closed and he was asleep.

It was nine o'clock when Heinz stole from the room, so as not to awaken the boy. He gave some orders to the nurse in the adjoining room and went across to his wife's salon. The room was in darkness, the windows were open, and the nightingales were singing in the lilac bushes.

"Are you there, Toni?" he called.

No answer.

He knocked at the door of her bedroom—no answer. She must be with Aunt Gruber, he said to himself, and went down to her apartments. The maid opened the door with a finger to her lips.

"Madame has taken chloral," she whispered, "and has just fallen asleep."

"Excuse me," said Heinz. "I thought my wife was here."

"Mrs. Von Kerkow is probably in the park. I saw her crossing the courtyard," whispered the maid.

Heinz started. Toni was usually timid about going out at night. He thanked the woman, went downstairs, and entered the garden by the side gate.

Perhaps he would find her. He was anxious to speak to her again ; he had the dull feeling that he had been too hard upon her during the past years ; he must not provoke her further by his sternness and indifference ; he would humor her, he must—things could not remain between them as they were. He resolved upon this course because, in his conscientiousness, with his painful sense of duty, he would not return evil for evil, because he hoped to find in duty a safeguard against the old passionate love that had reawakened in him on hearing Aenne's name again, on knowing that she still remembered him. She had wept over his sick child—why must he hear of this to-day of all days ?

And instead of going out to face the world and its struggles, from which he had thought himself safe forever, he was to shut himself up still closer within the barriers that he had made for himself—that Toni had made for him. He was to say to her, “ We belong to one another ; for the child's sake let us have peace ! I will rouse myself from the apathy of the past years—things cannot go on any longer as they are ! ”

He hastened along the paths with great strides ; the night was dark and sultry, and the nightingale's song was louder than usual. In the linden avenue he seated himself on a bench ; the frogs were croaking in the pond before him as though trying to out-voice the nightingales. Beyond the dark surface of the water and the sombre line of trees, a distant flash of lightning quivered from time to time, the scent of the linden blossoms was strong and sweet,

and the witchery of the night enwrapped and benumbed his senses.

He told himself repeatedly that Toni must have returned long ago to the castle; he would go to her and talk to her; and yet he remained motionless. The sound of wheels came slowly up the avenue, and turning, he recognized the carriage that had taken Lieutenant Grellert to the county town. The coachman and footman were talking together; there was plainly no one inside; the officer had doubtless sent the carriage home and was staying for some entertainment—yes, there was to be a ball after the concert. All this Toni had missed! It had been folly for him to attempt to force this pleasure-loving woman to remain always at her child's sick-bed. She had the correct idea of life. Things could not be altered by continually brooding over them, and what harm would there be in leaving the little one with the nurse now and then? None, none at all! It was only foolish sentimentalism not to take things as they were.

And he remained sitting where he was, striving to persuade himself of something that he did not believe, and in the midst of his struggling he seemed suddenly to hear the child's voice saying, "And she cried over me, papa!"

He sprang to his feet and strode blindly into the park, rapidly at first, then more and more slowly, coming to a dead halt at last. Profound stillness reigned about him; the nightingales and the frogs had grown silent. He was standing in the shadow of a leafy avenue; close before him, in a little clearing,

he saw the carved roof of the Japanese pavilion, and from within there came the sound of Toni's voice, speaking softly, but with terrible distinctness,—

“I repeat, he suspects—be careful.”

With equal distinctness came the reply,—

“The deuce, you say! That's unfortunate!”

A shiver ran over Heinz, but he felt at the same time a desire to laugh at himself—good, honest, stupid fellow, that he was!

What should he do? Break in upon this shameful rendezvous? Take his wife by the arm and strike the fellow down at his feet?

He clutched at the white birch near which he stood, dizzy, gasping, and a groan forced itself from his lips. Summoning all his strength, he advanced painfully and, on reaching the pavilion, he leaned again for support against the roughly carved doorpost.

A figure came toward him.

“Grellert!” he burst out.

“You here, Kerkow?” returned the familiar, drawling voice. “Fine evening—won't you sit down?” And at the same instant he struck a match, which lighted up the whole interior of the building for an instant.

It was empty, the door at the rear open.

“Grellert,” said Heinz, hoarsely, “you are a scoundrel!”

“Sir!”

“A scoundrel, I say!” repeated Heinz.

“You shall hear from me, sir!”

Heinz gave a loud, contemptuous laugh and turned on his heel.

He never knew how he reached home ; he only remembered that at dawn he was still sitting fully dressed at the bedside of his child, and that this thought had been hammering in his brain : What will become of him if the affair turns out badly for me ? There was Hede ! But it would be a cruel thing to hamper the girl in her dependent position with the care of the little cripple. The mother would neglect it, and as the wife of that unscrupulous villain—the thought unmanned him—anything but that ! The child so accustomed to his love must not come to this. He could leave him nothing, nothing, and to fight a duel under such circumstances ? Honor demanded it, but—ah, this foolish, uncomprehending world ! The best thing to do would be to take his revolver and shoot the pitiful little creature there, and then himself. But no, that would be cowardly, and besides—he had not the right.

He rose heavily and went to his desk in the adjoining room. There he wrote a few words on a card, placed it in an envelope and addressed it. He was about to ring, but glanced at the clock—it was still too early ; the first gray light of dawn was just stealing through the shutters. He shivered ; he went to the liqueur chest and took out a bottle of cognac and a glass, drank, and then lay down on the sofa near the writing table.

Once or twice he thought he heard light footsteps in the next room, but he must have been mistaken—Toni never rose before ten o'clock, and she could

have no suspicion as yet of what was to happen. Then a leaden sense of exhaustion came over him and he fell asleep.

He awoke with his head throbbing ; he staggered up and glanced into the child's room. The little fellow was wide awake, and the patient little face was turned toward him in surprise.

" Papa," he said, " it is so late and I am hungry ; but if you are tired, I will wait."

" No, darling ; I will just plunge my face into cold water and then I will open the windows and ring for your breakfast."

" Are you coming into the garden with me afterward ? "

" Yes—that is, not this morning, my boy. I have something—I am expecting a caller ; but after that I will wheel you into the forest and we will spend the day there."

The child nodded happily. As Heinz rang the bell to summon the nurse, his eye fell upon the clock ; he started—half-past ten ! Grellert's second must have come long ago.

" Has any one been here inquiring for me ? " he asked the girl.

" No one, sir. Shall I bring up your breakfast also ? "

" No, I am going to the dining-room. You are to take care of Heini to-day."

" But your wife is not at home."

" My wife ? Where——"

" We have looked for her everywhere, and Madam von Gruber sent up for her at eight o'clock ;

she is worse this morning, but we could not find my mistress anywhere."

He hastened through the next room and pushed open the door to the salon. The heavy air of the previous day, mingled with the smell that comes from flower vases that are not kept freshly filled, rushed out to meet him. He crossed this room also, entered the dining-room, surveyed the untouched breakfast table, and then passed into Toni's bedroom. The bed was undisturbed; the light in the hanging lamp burned feebly and was on the point of going out. Before the toilet table were crumpled scraps of paper; the drawers were pulled out, and in the one in which his wife kept her jewelry the key had been left. He came nearer and opened it; the Russia leather cases with their owner's monogram and coronet were gone, and in their place lay a letter addressed to him in Toni's hasty, characterless handwriting.

"You will admit that it would be folly for you two to fight. I have therefore begged Grellert to take me away to-day; we should have gone in a few weeks in any case, for I could not stand such a life any longer. Grellert's uncle is a very rich man, and we are going to New York to him. He has no children, and has been urging Grellert for some time to come to him. Our future is assured, and you also gain by the change; you are free. I go with the comforting conviction that neither you nor Heini will miss me. We shall get our divorce in due time, and then you too may find happiness, perhaps—I do not begrudge it you.

"So, farewell ; the curtain has fallen, the tragedy of our married life is over. That it ended rather suddenly is owing to the chance that led you to the park last night. Do not be foolish and attempt to draw the curtain up again ; this is my last request.

"TONI."

An hour later, he went to Madam von Gruber's bedside, the letter in his hand. He found the old lady with flushed cheeks and nervously winding her lace-trimmed handkerchief about her thin fingers.

"Ah, Heinz, Heinz," she faltered, "I should have warned you sooner ! I have seen it for some time, but one dislikes so to interfere between husband and wife."

"Don't excite yourself, auntie," he said soothingly.

"Tell me, Heinz, what steps have you taken ? Have you telegraphed ? She must come back, and you must fight him."

"An officer who deserts his post is not in a position to give me satisfaction," he said harshly, "and a wife who has left my house I will never take back."

"You are mad, Heinz—those are the views of the common people and not of gentlemen. You must challenge him."

"No, he must challenge me. I called him a scoundrel, and he goes away under that stigma. I have no desire to start a Trojan war about this woman ; on the contrary, I wish them a pleasant journey."

"People will put all the blame on you!" she cried. "They will say——"

"Let them say what they please! What concern is it of any one's if Kerkow's wife runs away from him?" he went on bitterly. "They will think it quite in order—the fellow is half mad, they will say, a good subject for an insane asylum! He will become a little more of a recluse, a little more sensitive and despondent, and when the child closes its eyes——" his voice was very low—"Well, I must hold out till then. Good-morning, aunt."

She looked after him with anxious eyes as he left the room, a man without one spark of energy, no longer capable of action.

At noon came a dispatch from Lieutenant Grellert's regiment, granting him three days' leave. His subordinate officer made the announcement to the governor of the castle and also reported that he had taken the command for the time being. Heinz nodded dumbly; Lieutenant Grellert's journey was no concern of his, nor Lieutenant Grellert's duped regiment.

While Heini was sleeping after dinner, Heinz himself fastened the shutters and doors of the rooms Toni had occupied and placed the key in his desk; then he seated himself at the window and gazed across at the little town, which had as yet no suspicion of the fine new scandal in store for it. He could see them gathered together, the beer drinkers in the taverns, could see the maid servant of the head official hurrying with flying apron from house to house with invitations to drink coffee—such an

event must be well talked over, must be duly celebrated! Nothing so interesting had happened in Breitenfels within the memory of man. The governor's wife had run away with the lieutenant in command of the garrison! Served him right, served him right!

He smiled to himself. What manner of man had he become? And suddenly, without any volition on his part, his eyes turned toward the little house where Aenne was, and his smile vanished. Would she laugh too? He shook his head. Ah, and if she did—there was no need for him to see it, let them only leave him in peace!

Let them all laugh if they would, he cared not so that only they left him to the peace that in his lonely room in the empty castle stole over him soothingly at the sight of the sleeping child—the peace that fell like a healing balm upon his weary soul.

DEFIANT HEARTS.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE following morning, Hede Kerkow knocked at the head forester's door. In response to his "Come in!" she entered with a pale, disturbed face.

"Sir, I have a favor to ask," she began; "it is something unusual, but I trust you will forgive me in the face of the great need that forces me to speak."

The big man had risen from his writing-table and was looking in perplexity at Hedwig; her delicate face was ghastly and her eyes seemed sunken.

"You have had bad news?" he asked, thinking of the sister in the insane asylum. "But sit down, I beg of you, Miss Hedwig."

"Thank you," she said. "Bad news, yes! You know how glad I have always been to be in your house, and that it will be very hard for me to have to leave the children, but I must ask you to allow me to resign my position here as soon as possible. I must go to Heinz."

The head forester who had left the house early the preceding morning and had not returned until ten o'clock at night, had no suspicion of the catastrophe, uncertain rumors of which had begun to spread through the town during the course of the previous evening.

"Miss Hedwig," he stammered, "I do not know how to answer you. What has happened?"

A flush passed over Hede Kerkow's face. She made two attempts to reply, but her voice failed her; at last she said, almost inaudibly,—

"Aunt Gruber writes me that a new misfortune has come to my brother—his wife has left him."

He made no answer. After a little while he said quietly,—

"Your duty toward your brother and his sick child comes before anything else. Your time is wholly your own, Miss Kerkow."

She lifted her head and looked at him. There was a strange expression in her eyes, a look of reproach, as though his ready acquiescence to her request had wounded her. He did not see it; his head was half averted, and he was looking out into the street.

"Thank you," she faltered.

"Do not feel any concern about us," he went on. "Caroline has learned a great deal from you, Agnes is almost grown up, and——"

"And you will easily find some one to take my place," she added.

Again he made no reply.

"I will give the necessary directions to Caroline," she continued in a firmer voice. "Then I will avail myself of your permission and go to my brother."

She inclined her head gravely and a few moments later she was ascending the castle hill. Without stopping to inquire about her aunt she went directly to her brother's rooms.

Rainy weather had set in, and Heinz was with

Heini in his corner room. The child, wrapped in shawls and coverings, was lying sobbing on the couch, nervous and impatient; he had just been told that his mother was never coming back and that his father was very unhappy.

Hede's knock had not been heard. Heinz was kneeling at the child's bedside, talking to him, when Hede suddenly stood before them.

"I have come, Heinz," she said simply, "and if I can help you, I shall stay."

She held out her hand to him, he placed his in hers, and the child ceased to cry. Neither brother nor sister said a word. After a long pause, during which Heinz paced up and down the room, he asked, coming to a halt,—

"Can you leave at once like this, Hede?"

"Yes," she said.

"But it will be very hard for you."

"You are my brother; you are all I have."

She did not look at him as she said this, and in a little while rose to go to Aunt Gruber, whom she had not seen for a long time.

The old lady received her with many groans and sighs.

"Of course, you are going to stay with him, Hede?" she asked, as she ended her long lament.

"Yes, aunt."

"Can you leave at once? You are a sort of dependent, you know, and such people are glad to exercise their power."

"Such people. What people?"

"The head forester, for instance. If this wretched

affair has had no other good result, it has at least released you from that menial position. So he graciously permits you to come to Heinz at once? Impossible!"

The moisture had gathered in Hede's eyes, but she said nothing.

"Is there anything I can do for you, aunt?" she said quietly.

"No," groaned the old lady, "If only Heinz would be sensible! He ought at least to act as though he were wild to get at this man, Grellert, to act as though his challenge had not reached the fellow or had been ignored by him. He is injuring himself by his attitude."

"Injuring himself by not fighting with that wretch on account of such a woman?" demanded the girl with quivering lips. "I am thankful, aunt, that he was too sensible; he was thinking of his helpless son."

"They could have fired into the air!" cried the old lady.

Hedwig shrugged her shoulders.

"How can Heinz help it if Grellert ran away before the challenge could be delivered? My brother would have done his share toward complying with a custom that I think a crime."

Madam von Gruber cast an angry glance at her.

"That is the result of living with plebeians for years," she retorted, turning her head away.

Hedwig left her. Her heart was heavy, and the tears rolled down her cheeks as she made the arrangements for removing her belongings from the

head forester's. She had not the courage to look again into the eyes of the children whom she was leaving so hurriedly, and of whom she had grown so fond. That her departure could have been accepted in so matter-of-fact a way she had not believed; she had expected to hear at least one word of regret. Did not her going leave any gap? Had her faithful care been so in vain? Suddenly she drew herself up; a hard, proud curve appeared about her lips—it was only one more bitter experience. She had looked for little gratitude, and——

“Give me the room I had before,” she asked of Heinz. “The child, of course, I will keep with me; he disturbs you, and you must have sleep, Heinz.”

“The child? No,” he answered quietly. “Heini shall stay with me.”

A sob rose in her throat as she looked at him, but she said nothing.

“Do not be vexed, Hede,” he pleaded.

“I am sorry that I can be of no help to you, Heinz.”

“You can be, and you must remain here with me, Hede. You ought always to have lived here, but—you know how it was.”

“Lived here? Idle? I do not agree with you,” she answered bitterly.

She was still struggling with herself; Heinz saw that there was something she wished to say, but she turned away abruptly and went out.

She longed to return to the head forester's, but her pride would not allow her. They would not miss her! Caroline had learned a great deal from

her—the eldest was almost grown up—this was what he had said. She was, after all, only what she had always been, a woman of no consequence.

She entered the close, empty room which bore no evidence that she was to occupy it again, closed the door behind her, and fell to brooding over her blank, purposeless existence, that once more rose before her in all its nakedness and barrenness, after a brief glimpse of something better and brighter. It was all false glamour, which she had taken for reality!

CHAPTER XXIII.

SUMMER had gone and autumn was at hand ; a dreary, wet, premature autumn. More deserted than ever, Castle Breitenfels looked down upon the quiet town ; were it not for the solitary light high up in the corner window, nothing would have indicated that it was still inhabited. The duke had given up the shooting for that year and was at Cannes with his consumptive son, and the good citizens of the Duchy of Breitenfels sat about their tables and talked of the time when they would become Prussian.

Otherwise everything was the same, except that the old lady-in-waiting was dead ; death had overtaken her on one of the hot days of the past August. She had been laid in the churchyard below, with all the pomp and ceremony she had desired.

It was at the interment that the good people of Breitenfels had last seen Von Kerkow ; that he was still alive could be seen only by the fact that his lamp burned nightly above them. The head forester also watched the light, night after night. He himself kept more and more to his study and no longer went in the twilight to hear his children sing ; indeed, they did not sing now ; there was no one to play for them. At times the strong man was seized

with a fierce dread, an unrest, a feeling of anger and impatience that made him unjust toward those about him and toward himself, so that he would snatch his cap from the wall and stride out of the house ; but he did not come home with peace in his heart ; the forest had lost its soothing voice for him.

In the midst of the solemn stillness, he would seem suddenly to hear a calm, clear voice, as he had heard it a thousand times during the past years. And he would stare down at the ground as though expecting to find there small footprints such as he had found on the evening on which she had come to him to take charge of his desolate house. And when he came home, weary and exhausted, he would mechanically open the door of the sitting-room and look toward the window-seat where a fragile figure had once sat with the youngest child at her side—but the seat was empty. The clock on the wall had stopped, the flowers at the window drooped their heads, the children hung about idly or romped in the garden, and the dogs made themselves comfortable again on the sofa, and slunk past him with their tails between their legs although he had no thought of punishing them.

He would only sigh and take some silly story book away from the eldest girl and tell her sharply to see to her little brother and sister. Then he would go to his room and seat himself at his desk, but not to work. He had once been content to remain here when he had known that his household was in good hands, and he had never thought that it could be otherwise, fool that he had been !

But a change had come, and Doctor May had told him that he must now get some one else to take charge of his house, for the children's sake.

No, no, he would not! He could not see any one sitting in her place by the window! Things must continue as they were! Agnes would be confirmed at Easter and could assume the management of the household.

It was strange that Hede Kerkow had never come down to visit them. True, she sometimes sent for the children to come to her, and they always returned with hair neatly brushed and clothes mended. He had never noticed it himself, but Caroline said so. And Caroline would unceremoniously send to Miss Kerkow by Agnes the children's torn stockings and clothes, declaring that she had no time to attend to them herself; and for the last few days little Mariechen had been going up to the castle every morning at ten o'clock to continue her lessons in reading and arithmetic under Miss Kerkow's supervision.

It was the head forester's birthday. He had forgotten it himself, but the bright nosegay of asters and colored leaves that stood on the coffee-table reminded him of it, and so did the solemnly expectant faces of the children, who, each, in turn recited a verse taught them by Miss Kerkow.

A strange feeling came over him and his words of thanks stuck in his throat. He could not help thinking of Aenne. A fierce tempest had swept across his life, had shaken and bent him with uncontrollable passion, and then—no, he would never

conquer it ; it would remain an open wound all his life long. And together with this recollection came another feeling that was like balm upon the wound, making him forget for a time, and this soothing influence came from the presence of a cultured woman whom chance had brought to his home and who had presided over his household like a good angel.

The thought had never come to him to bind her to him forever, nor did it come to him to-day ; he would not have had the courage to stretch out his hand to this woman of noble birth ; he worshipped her from a distance as the good spirit of his home. And now, since she had gone, a strange longing crept into his heart, till his one thought grew to be, "I cannot live without her ; without her life is not worth living !" And yet he had to see her constantly, sitting up yonder at her window, the children about her—it was enough to drive one mad !

He laughed at himself and shook his head, so that the children stopped in wonder and nudged each other at their father's queer manner. Then he roused himself from his brooding and patted the sturdy little lad's head.

"Well, what can I do for you to show that your verses pleased me ?" he asked.

They looked at each other and said nothing.

"Do you want chocolate and buns ? Caroline shall get them for you this afternoon." They shook their heads, and the younger children pressed closer to the eldest and the boy whispered something to her.

"We want Aunt Hede to come back, we miss her so!" Agnes burst out, and the tears rose to her blue eyes. "We miss her so!" echoed the other two, and the boy added, "It's no kind of life without her—Caroline says so!"

The head forester got up and moved away; he could not bear to see them in their childish grief.

"Aunt Hede has to take care of little Heini; he has no mother now," he said.

"We haven't any mother, either," returned the boy pouting.

"But you are no relation to her; Heini is her nephew and he is sick; you must think of that."

"I shall be sick, too, if she doesn't come back," the little fellow persisted stubbornly.

"Perhaps Aunt Kerkow will give us an afternoon and take coffee with us. All three of you go up and ask her," he suggested.

The haste in which his proposal was complied with made him smile sadly. From the window he followed the children with his eyes, as they scampered joyously up the castle slope, and he was still standing there when they returned with hanging heads. And man of forty that he was, he felt his heart beat like a schoolboy's.

The children all began to speak at once:

"She can't come, papa, she can't come—here is a letter, papa!"

"She does not want to come," he said to himself, "but why? He took the note and went across to his study. The envelope contained a card, and beneath the coat of arms and the name, Hedwig von

Kerkow, was written: "With hearty congratulations on the day."

"I would rather she had sent no message," he thought, and the blood rushed to his forehead.

He laid the card on the table and drew nearer to his books and papers, to bury himself in his work. The oldest girl slipped in after a time and came to him.

"Aunt Hede said that she would have come herself, but she could not get away; she was just going to send the man with the card."

He nodded.

"I can't help you to-day, you see. You will have to drink your chocolate without Aunt Hede?"

"Papa, I think Heini must be going to die," the child began afresh, "Aunt Hede looked so pale and sad."

"Did she tell you so?"

"No—I only think so. And she kissed us all and told us we must be very good to-day."

"Then you must do as she says," he replied. "I will come and drink chocolate with you this afternoon."

The child went away. The father flung aside his pen and stared before him. Had he done anything to hurt her? He pondered and pondered, but could think of nothing. She had wished to go away, and he had made his own wishes subservient to hers. He had not ventured even to say, "It will be hard for me to let you go." He had only said, "If such is the case I must not keep you." Good, simple

hearted man that he was, he could not see that his self-effacement might be misunderstood.

So he could think of nothing ; he believed only that her old pride had found her out, now that it was possible for to live as her rank required, and—yes, there was the sick child to care for.

In the afternoon he forgot about the chocolate and had to be sent for. And the children did not like the drink, because Caroline had let it burn ; Mariechen upset her cup and covered herself with its contents ; the room was cold and uncomfortable, and the boy whimpered with the toothache. The head forester sent for Caroline to make a fire. Agnes went to the kitchen to give the order, but the much-tormented maid was in a bad humor, and scolded dreadfully at having to leave her washtub ; it was a God-forsaken household, she declared, and she wouldn't be able to stand it much longer, and any widower who had a chance to marry and didn't was a fool. The governor of the castle could have gotten a nurse for his sick child. If his sister were the wife of the head forester now, he couldn't have sent for her as he had, and would have had to look for some one else. Such a household was enough to try the patience of a saint !

The little girl returned quite pale. She seated herself on the window-seat and stared, as though she had never seen him before, at her father, who, one hand behind his back was walking up and down the room, leading the whimpering boy.

"Papa," she said at last, "Caroline is angry with you."

"Indeed! Why?"

"She says you ought to have married Aunt Kerkow and then we wouldn't have had all this trouble."

The head forester came to a sudden halt and stared at the child; a quick flush had risen to his face and a violent retort was on his tongue. But he controlled himself, dropped the boy's hand, and strode heavily from the room.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"THEY are going, one after the other," the people said in Breitenfels. "There is hardly one of the old household left at the castle."

And now the old doctor had followed the rest.

It was during Advent that he had closed his weary eyes. "A beautiful death," the people said. The old man had been up to the castle in the morning, to see the little invalid, and had lain down on the sofa after dinner; he had slept so long that his wife had gone in to wake him. But his sleep was so profound that neither his wife's tearless cries nor the maid's screams could rouse him.

One of the resident physicians had telegraphed to the children, and Hede Kerkow had come down from the castle and spent the night with the broken-hearted wife. The head forester had come the following morning to inquire whether there was anything he could do, and to apologize for not having come before; he had only just learned the sad news, as he had been absent the previous day.

"So you are able to get away?" he had said to Hede.

"Oh, yes, I can get away," Hede had answered indifferently.

They had not met for a long time; they were in

the Mays' dining-room, where the doctor's wife sat motionless in her arm-chair, only asking from time to time,—

"How late is it? Aenne ought to reach here at two o'clock."

The head forester glanced shyly at Hede Kerkow. The dim light of the December day showed him a changed and grief-stricken face; the cheerful repose of manner had disappeared, giving place to a nervous unrest.

At this moment the maid appeared with the announcement that there was no carriage to be had to bring Miss Aenne from the station; they were all engaged.

"I will tell Heinz," said Hede; "his carriage can meet her."

"Poor child!" the old lady moaned. "Is there no one to take pity on her and prepare her for the news of her father's death? She only knows that he is very ill."

"Of course, Mrs. May. I will meet her."

Hede took up her cloak and left the house.

Heinz was sitting on a sofa, reading the legal document that notified him that his divorce had been granted by the courts. Heini, who now had a larger invalid's chair, was sitting bolstered up by cushions, and was making letters on a slate with his left hand; the little fellow could not use his right. Hede briefly made known her request, and her brother ordered the carriage at once.

"Will you not go to meet the poor girl?" asked Hede, when the servant had gone, "I feel so worn

out," she added hesitatingly. In reality she only wished to rouse him from his lethargy.

"Meet Miss May? No! A woman understands better how to manage such things—I—do not ask it of me, I beg!" he answered.

He returned to the document, then locked it in his desk, took up a newspaper, and began to read, as he always did when he wished to be alone.

"Forgive me," she murmured, and after laying her hand gently on Heini's head, she left the room.

Heinz watched her through the window as she drove away, but he scarcely thought of the sad errand on which she was bound. He was a broken man, and he, more than any one else, was conscious of it—he for whom the world held nothing of value save his child. From that day he was free, but he no longer knew what use to make of his freedom. Even had he still possessed the energy, he could not let the child face an uncertain future in the world where his father must first make for himself a place that was in accord with his tastes as well as with his powers.

The child would never be well, but on his last visit Doctor May had said that he would live and, perhaps, when the chronic inflammation had been conquered, an attempt might be made to teach him to walk on crutches. And then he had tapped Heinz on the shoulder and added,—

"He will be a pride and an honor to you yet; he has brains, methinks. Life is full of surprises; I never thought that my Aenne—well, good-morning, Mr. von Kerkow!"

And to-day the old man was lying in the town below, dead! And Aenne was coming home to her dead father, Aenne, who had made something of her life. Heinz no longer read the newspaper notices under the head of "Art and Literature," since her name had begun to appear in them. This young girl had put him to shame; of her own strength she had freed herself from a man she did not love, had defiantly won for herself a position that was worthy of admiration. As poor and without prospects as he himself had been, she had dared to take up the struggle with life and had won; as for him, he was dead, dead, yet alive. And in his solitude a terrible dread had taken possession of him. He thought continually of his sister in the insane asylum, and there would come hours—hours of horror—which he fought through alone, for he could not terrify Hede with the thought that he, too—

The one thing that could save him was war. But war was not meant to come to the rescue of a ruined life. And there was the child, always the child! Hede's manner towards the little fellow, inheriting as he had all his father's bitterness and ironical indifference, was comical in the extreme; she tried to treat him as she did the head forester's round-cheeked youngsters who still believed in fairy tales. Heini did not believe in fairy tales.

"I know better," the little five-year-old man would say. "There aren't any magicians; there aren't any good fairies, either, or papa would get me one and she would make me well."

He wanted Aunt Hede to tell him "true stories,"

and he would listen over and over again to the tortures endured by the Dauphin of France.

"They beheaded his father," he would say, "but I have mine; little Louis was much worse off than I am, Aunt Hede, and he was a prince."

The aunt, coming from the healthy atmosphere of the nursery at the head forester's was chilled in this atmosphere of sickness and resignation. And yet the child had such lovable ways! For fear of troubling his father, he would endure pain uncomplainingly for hours at a time. Since his mother's flight, his father had fallen into the habit of sitting brooding for hours, smoking cigar after cigar, and the child had grown to have a tender consideration for him, as though the man were the invalid who must be loved and cared for.

"Why didn't you want to meet the lady, papa, and what was the bad news that you didn't want to carry to her?" he asked, suddenly.

Heinz came over to his son and took his hand.

"I may as well tell you, my boy, the good old doctor is dead. He was old and tired and is at rest now—it is the order of things."

"The order of things," repeated Heini. "You said the same thing when Aunt Gruber died."

"Yes, Heini, life makes us all weary; old age is like evening, and, when night comes, we are glad to sleep."

Heini nodded.

"I am very sorry, papa; I was very fond of him."

"So was I, Heini, very fond, and now his daugh-

ter is coming, and Aunt Hede is to tell her that her father has fallen asleep."

"Do you know his daughter, papa?"

Heinz stroked the fair head.

"Yes, my boy, and so do you."

"Why, no, I don't, Papa!"

"Yes, you do, Heini. She was the one who held the glass of milk for you to drink last summer—you remember?"

"Yes, and now she will cry again. You should have gone to her, papa."

"No, Heini, I don't like to see her cry."

"Don't you like her?"

Heinz did not reply.

After dinner, while the child slept, he took his stand by the window again and waited for the return of the carriage. He had sent for the gardener and ordered some palm branches, the finest that were to be had. Then it occurred to him that he would have to go to the funeral—funerals were now the only variation in his monotonous life—and he would see Anne. Perhaps he would only go to the churchyard; perhaps they would not miss him if he did not go at all.

At last he saw the carriage skirting the park wall, saw it roll across the castle square and draw up before the doctor's house. A figure alighted and disappeared through the doorway, the carriage turned and slowly climbed the steep ascent.

Hede entered shortly after; her eyes were red, and she gave him her hand in silence.

"She asked me to thank you for the carriage," she

said at last. "How have you gotten on in the meanwhile? Was dinner properly served?"

"I think so—yes—everything was in order."

"Then *auf wiedersehen* at tea time; I am going to rest awhile." And she went to her room.

It was her first meeting with Aenne, and the young girl's appearance, the charm of her manner, had won her at once, as had the anxious questioning in the great, tearful eyes as she approached, and as had her simple manner of receiving the sad news.

"My poor mother!" she had said with a sob, and then had turned to the coachman and said, "You will drive fast, won't you?" During the whole journey she had only asked once, "Have you seen my mother? Is there any one to care for her? Oh, if I were only home!"

"Günther was with her when I left her," Hede had answered constrainedly.

"Oh, I am so glad, so glad!" was the reply, and then for the first time came the tears.

Ah, yes, what was she in comparison with this girl, she, poor Hede Kerkow, with her thirty-five years? He had loved her, he loved her still, and could she wonder that he noticed no one else?

Something like peace had stolen over her, the peace that comes to one in the face of an unalterable fact. All her foolish hopes and wishes, which she had scarcely confessed even to herself had been dashed to the ground. There was but one thing that Providence could grant her now—to enable her to win Heinz back to life again.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE old doctor had been laid to rest. A week had passed since then; the children were all still with their mother, who seemed unable to adapt herself to her widowhood. The lieutenant and the lawyer wished to remain until after Christmas, and there was still much to be discussed with the old lady, much for which no fitting opportunity had as yet presented itself. Aunt Emilie, who had arrived a day after Aenne—she had to close the little lodging preparatory to a long absence—had done her best for her sister-in-law, although her own heart was heavy at the loss of her brother. The old lady clung convulsively to her daughter, and Aenne was as gentle and patient and comforting as only she could be. She slept near her mother, listened all the night through to her weeping, and bore uncomplainingly the reproach that she was unfeeling, when nature asserted itself and she fell asleep.

To-day she had felt so exhausted and in need of rest after a sleepless night, that she had gone up to her room and left her mother to her aunt and brothers for a few hours. The widow's grief had taken a new form, the form of bitterness.

"If I had only died at once," she lamented over and over again, "then my children would not have

had a poor, forsaken, old creature like me to burden them!"

The lieutenant, who had something of his mother's temperament, laid down the paper he was reading.

"Not one of us has made any complaint, mother, and no one has said that you were a burden. Your grief must not make you unjust."

It was dusk, between five and six; the lamps had not been lighted, and a fine snow was falling.

"Has any one of you asked, 'Mother, where are you going to make your home?'" she retorted from her arm-chair by the stove. "Not one of you! You go on living here as though nothing had happened."

"If we have said nothing," was the impatient rejoinder, "it was only out of kindness—we respected your grief. But now that you have brought up the question yourself, we can discuss it without further scruple. Where is Aenne?"

"Upstairs," answered Aunt Emilie. "She is resting; let her be."

But just then the door opened, and the young girl glided like a shadow into the room.

"Ah, there you are!" said the lieutenant. "We were just going to call you. We must have a talk over what is to be done."

"Is mother here?" she asked. "It is so dark that I cannot see."

"Where else should I be?" groaned the old lady from her corner.

"Sit down, Aenne," the lieutenant went on; "we don't need a light. Mother has just brought up the

question of where she is to go. Unfortunately she won't be able to remain here, but there must be houses to be had in the neighborhood."

The widow began to sob.

"Don't cry, mother dear," said Aenne soothingly. "You will be able to remain here for three months, at least, and then you must come to me."

"You will come to her, you mean," interposed the younger brother, who had not spoken before.

Aenne made no reply.

"Or do you want mother to be obliged to go to a city in her old age and get accustomed to lodgings four flights up?"

"I would rather die!" declared the widow. "Ah, if father had only taken me with him!"

"But, mother," begged Aenne, "do be a little more composed! It is not necessary to decide to-day."

"Oh, yes, I knew how it would be! My only daughter, too!" she cried, sobbing violently.

"Mother," said the girl firmly, "if I were married, would you require me to come to Breitenfels to you? Would you not come to me?"

The old lady stopped crying for a moment. "But you are not married!" she persisted, like an obstinate child.

"I have my profession, mother, a profession to which I have devoted years of my life; it has supported me and brought me happiness, and I am as firmly bound to it as to a husband."

"So your profession is more to you than I am!" was the bitter reply.

"Would you ask Robert or Walter to give up their careers and come here to live with you?"

"Stuff!" ejaculated the younger brother from his corner.

The lieutenant cleared his throat.

"So you have turned into one of those woman's rights women who are ruining our family life?" he asked angrily. "A woman's place is with her family—the daughter belongs with the mother!"

"Have I questioned that?" asked Aenne. "I shall stay with her as long as I live; I know no duty more sacred. In the last letter father wrote to me, he said, perhaps in anticipation of his death, 'You will always stay with your mother, Aenne, won't you?' The question was not necessary; my heart would have told me what to do. But I think that the one who has ceased battling with life should yield to the one who is in the midst of the struggle."

"Go, then!" moaned the old lady. "You can go at once; I have seen that you were impatient to be off."

"Am I to blame because father left us nothing?" asked the girl.

"If he had left me rich, you would have been glad to stay at home with your old mother; but a poor old creature like me, with only a pension of five hundred marks, can get along by herself as best she can."

"You are quite right," said Aenne, steadily, though her voice was strained. "It is because we are poor that I must go out into the world and not live upon

your five hundred marks ; they would scarcely be enough for you."

Her voice failed her and she went out hurriedly.

Aunt Emilie's indignant tones sounded behind her.

"Are you all mad?" she cried. "Just because a girl is not married, is she to be set down wherever her mother and her considerate brothers please to put her? Is it to bury herself in Breitenfels that she has worn herself out with her studies day and night? Don't you suppose that she loves her career, or have you so little appreciation, so little respect for art? Do you believe that you can shield her from poverty and suffering if she does not make use of her gifts—you two young jackanapes, who haven't a penny of your own, who have never given, but have always taken, even to the poor girl's hardly earned groschen?"

"Don't get excited," the lieutenant interrupted coolly. "Who says that Aenne shall not make further use of her gifts? She can make her concert tours as easily from here as from Dresden."

"No, she cannot!" cried Aunt Emilie in a tone no one would have believed her capable of. "She must live amidst artistic surroundings, she must hear good music ; she must go on working and studying ; she cannot do that here, and besides, I gave the child her education and I have something to say in the matter! Aenne is going back to Dresden, and if her mother is sensible, she will go with her ; if not, she will have to stay here alone, or one of you can come to her ; you are her children as well as Aenne."

The widow was speechless with dismay, and the two sons said nothing. A few moments later, when their mother fell to weeping again, they went out together, unnoticed.

When the widow recovered from her fit of crying Aenne was standing beside her.

"A letter has come for you, mamma," she said. "Auntie will bring the lamp." And she took Mrs. May's hand affectionately and led her to the sofa. "My dear old mother!" she said gently and kissed her.

But the mother felt herself too deeply aggrieved; she did not return her child's kiss.

A few moments later the lamp was brought in and the old lady read the letter. It was from the duke's chamberlain, announcing that the widow of the late Doctor May was to remain in possession of her present home as long as she should live.

"There is some one, at least, who has compassion on me!" she said. "Some one, at least!"

Aenne made no sign; she had taken up a piece of embroidery and was busy over it. She felt now that her cause was lost.

"Are you not glad?" asked her mother sharply.

"Ah, mamma," answered Aenne, "I can understand how hard it must be to go away from a place where one has been happy for so many years. Now, of course, you will stay here."

"And you will stay with me?"

Aenne only looked at her steadily, and the mother's eyes suddenly dropped before that quiet, earnest gaze.

"It is your duty," she said, in confusion.

"Yes, mother, and my love for you will make it easy."

"I never had any children," muttered Aunt Emilie, "but it seems to me that there are duties on both sides."

"Auntie!" implored Aenne.

"What did she say?" demanded the mother suspiciously.

A ring at the front door saved Aenne the necessity of replying; the maid brought in a card, which bore the inscription, "Doctor Lehmann, Practising Physician."

Mrs. May knew only that he had settled in the town recently. She told the maid to show the visitor in.

Doctor Lehmann entered. He was a young man, rather thick set, and the scar across his left cheek was in keeping with his alert manner; it was evident that it was hard to give to his frank face the gravity that the occasion demanded. After a few polite formalities concerning the death of his colleague, he came to the object of his visit. He had heard from the steward the night before, that the doctor's widow was to remain in the house, and he had come to ask if she would be willing to rent him one or two rooms.

Aenne rose suddenly and left the room. She did not wish to hear her mother's refusal of his request; that she would refuse, she was convinced. She seated herself at the kitchen hearth, where she had loved to sit as a child and watch the leaping flames;

in Dresden she had so often thought of this cosy spot. To-day her thoughts wandered from here to Dresden, to her dear little home under the eaves, where she had learned so many things, among others that it is possible to subdue one's heart and to be content. She must bid farewell to the happy life full of work and glad activity. What would her teachers say? What would the managers say, with whom she had made engagements a year ahead? She would be able to meet them from here for a while, but then—then the world would begin to say that Miss May was making no progress; she would fade gradually from the minds of the managers and of the public, and then the loneliness and solitude would begin again. She would give singing lessons here to the daughters of the farmers in the town below and those of the neighboring estates; they would want to sing songs by Abt and would think Brahm's hideous, and, if she were fortunate, she might take part in occasional concerts at the county seat.

Aunt Emilie joined her shortly.

"Don't lose courage, child. Things are never as bad as they seem."

Aenne shook her head.

"I promised father, auntie, and mother must not be left alone; only I thought she loved me well enough to—but she was right; it was unfair of me to ask it of her."

"Never mind," said her aunt comfortingly. "I am old and I will stay with her; you are a sensible child and you can go back alone. They will think

better of it by-and-by ; your brothers were ready enough to take what you sent them, and they will miss it."

"No, auntie, I will not sadden my mother's old age ; it was against her wish that I went out into the world ; she was always anxious about me."

"Of course you ought to have married, and you didn't."

Aenne sighed.

"Don't let us speak of that, auntie," she begged.

The dining-room door opened and they heard Mrs. May escorting her visitor out. Shortly after she entered the kitchen ; for the first time since her husband's death there was a look on her face that recalled the active, thrifty housekeeper.

"I have rented father's rooms to him," she announced. "He is coming at New Year's—conditional, of course, upon the chamberlain's consent."

Aenne grew pale.

"Father's rooms — rented ?" she faltered.
"Father's rooms ?"

"With the furniture—how else are we to get on ?"

Neither of the astonished listeners made any reply ; Aenne did not understand her mother. That she should have begun already the struggle for existence, should have rented so soon to a stranger the dead man's private rooms.

"It is better to have a protector in the house than for us women to live here alone," the mother continued, and she pounced upon the little maid-servant, who had left the kettle standing almost empty upon the stove.

A fresh hope had sprung up in the old lady's breast—the young doctor's eyes had followed Aenne with an expression of admiration as she had left the room.

CHAPTER XXVI.

AT dusk on Christmas Eve, Hede Kerkow carried down to the head forester's house the little presents that she had made for the children. She knew that their father would not be at home; it was his custom on this night to make a round of the preserves for the special benefit of the poachers who were bent on securing their holiday dinner. She meant to distribute her gifts quickly among the children and return at once to the castle chapel for the Christmas Eve service.

Heini had been given his presents earlier in the afternoon. The sick child's eyes had rested on the lights of the Christmas tree with an expression very different from that in the eyes of healthy children; and Heinz? He had been even more chary of speech than usual, and had stood at the window gazing out into the distance as though he were seeking something there; for the first time the thought had come to Hede that perhaps he had loved Toni.

She brushed the tears from her eyes as she opened the head forester's front door, and the next moment had forgotten all her own sad thoughts amidst the rejoicing of the little ones. The children were as radiant as though the Christ-child had appeared among them in person; they hugged and danced

about their "dear, bad auntie," in the familiar room, which did not look in the least Christmas-like. Even Caroline came running in to express her delight.

"So you have come at last, Miss von Kerkow, and how glad the master will be when he comes home! Of course you are going to stay and help eat the carp? I've never been able to get the horse-radish sauce right."

But the children would not hear of their auntie going to the kitchen; she must help them trim the tree, they declared; Agnes was to have done it, but the candles would keep toppling over.

"You will stay, auntie, won't you?" they pleaded, and three pairs of arms were flung about her and three pairs of childish eyes laughed into hers, and what promises were made her if she would only stay!

"I will give you the very prettiest present I get," the boy assured her, "half of it, at least," he added, hastily. And little Mariechen declared, "I will take papa's away from him and give it to you, if you will stay."

"I will help you trim the tree, if you'll be quick," was her only answer. "But I cannot stay afterward; think of poor little Heini!"

She lighted the parlor lamp, on which the dust lay thick, stirred up the fire, for the room was anything but warm, and set about trimming the tree with feverish haste. The children looked on with beaming faces, and Agnes handed her the sweet-meats and the tapers. When all was ready, Hedwig took a cloth, dusted the room hastily, as though she

were doing something wrong. After banishing the children from the room and hurriedly placing her modest gifts under the tree, she swept like a whirlwind into the kitchen and whipped the cream for the carp sauce.

"When will your master be home?" she asked.

"Oh, probably he will be late," the old serving-man answered. "He was going to the Buchroder preserves and went on horseback."

Hede glanced at the clock. It was not yet half-past five.

"I must go at six, Caroline, so as to be at the chapel in time for service," she said. "Now remember—before serving the fish, put in the grated horse-radish ; that is all."

"Won't you just wait a moment longer, miss?" begged the girl. "I want so much to buy something for my Fritz, and the stores will be closed by and by, and I can't leave the children alone."

"Well, then—but be quick, Caroline," answered Hede, seating herself nervously on a kitchen chair. "Be quick!" she repeated.

"I'll be back in no time," returned the girl, catching up her flannel-lined cloak and hurrying away.

Once outside, she slackened her pace.

"You can wait a little while—until the master gets home; I'm in no hurry."

When she returned after a prolonged absence, Miss Kerkow was still sitting where she had left her, staring before her with knitted brows, unconscious that Caroline had been away a good half hour.

"There's plenty of time before service," said the girl. "Thank you very much, Miss von Kerkow. I stopped to buy a pair of stockings for my Fritz."

Hede rose.

"Fetch me my cloak and hat, Caroline; I must be going now; I will not say good-night to the children, or they will begin to tease again."

"Dear me!" assented the maid. "I wonder what makes them so quiet! They are probably at the window, watching for their father. I will get your wraps at once—I'll just see to the stove first." And she took up an armful of wood and carefully replenished the fire, stick by stick.

There was a ring at the door. Hedwig Kerkow stood motionless. Of course it was the head forester. The man-servant hobbled across the hall to let him in.

Hede remained standing as though she had been detected in a crime, and waited for the door to the head forester's room to open, when she could slip out unobserved. But the children were already in the hall, welcoming their father with the joyful news of her arrival.

"Aunt Hede is here, papa! She came at five o'clock. She doesn't want to stay, but you mustn't let her go—will you, papa?" And then Caroline ran to the kitchen door, crying, "Miss von Kerkow is in here, sir!"

Hede saw that she was caught. She wished at least to beat a dignified retreat, so she advanced quietly toward the head forester, who was standing in the midst of the children, his coat and cap pow-

dered with snow that made him look like the figures of Santa Claus in the shop windows.

"I will not detain you," she said pleasantly. "I am going to the chapel. I am glad to be able to wish you a merry Christmas."

"Thank you, Miss von Kerkow. But I am sorry that you will not spend the evening with us." He removed his cap and set it on the boy's head, pulled off his coat and handed it to Agnes. "Still you will come in for a moment, will you not?" he begged, "or I shall think that you are going because I have come." And as the children ran off with the cap and coat, he turned toward the sitting-room.

"You mustn't go in that room, papa!" called Agnes. "Our presents for you are in there!"

He turned obediently and led the way to his study.

Hede hesitated an instant and then followed him. He went to the cabinet where the lamp stood, lighted it, set it on the table, and begged her to be seated.

"Things are just as you left them, you see," he said, with a melancholy smile.

He seated himself opposite to her and stared at the faded table cover, while he played with its fringe in silence. Hede was silent also, and both their hearts beat fast. The children's voices sounded once or twice and then all grew quiet. Caroline had called them into the kitchen. "Listen," she said, "we will all go to church—we must see the great Christmas tree near the altar. Your papa is getting your presents ready and your auntie is helping him."

Caroline had suddenly developed into a diplomatist. "Now or never," she thought to herself. In a twinkling she had gotten her charges ready.

"See to the fire, David," she said to the old man, "and if the master asks for us, tell him we have gone to the church."

An hour later, the little party pushed its homeward way through the crowd and out upon the castle square.

"Why, papa is in his study!" cried Agnes. "He has forgotten all about Christmas, Caroline!"

"Wait a bit," grumbled the maid. "Don't run like that—you'll tumble down on the ice!" But she, too, had broken into a half run, and was racing with the children toward the house. "Let us go across the court," she cried, and they went in by the back door, as they had gone.

The old serving-man was asleep by the kitchen fire.

"Wake up!" Caroline shouted in his ear. "Hasn't the master called?"

"No, I haven't heard anything."

"Has he gone out?"

"I haven't heard him go."

"You've been asleep, and the fire's almost out!" exclaimed Caroline. "Be very quiet," she said, turning to the children. "I think your father must be in the parlor with the Christ-child. I'll go and see."

Therewith the honest soul betook herself to her master's sleeping-room, and lifting the curtain that divided the two rooms, peeped into the study. A

ery of exultation almost escaped her, but she recollected herself in time and began waving her arms wildly about with joy at what she saw. Then she crept noiselessly away.

"Children," she said with a sly smile, "you must wait a little longer; your father is still busy, but you will find an extra fine Christmas present waiting for you."

The children acquiesced and looked on with interest at the preparations for supper. The water had been boiling for some time, but a deathly stillness still reigned throughout the house. At last Caroline lost patience.

"Come, children!" she exclaimed. "A man ought to have some consideration for his own children on Christmas Eve!"

And they went together to the head forester's study; Caroline knocked with a hard finger, and Hermann beat against the door with his fists.

"Papa! papa!" called the children. "It is almost eight o'clock!"

"Come in!" was the reply.

They burst into the room and stood staring with open eyes and mouths—all except Caroline, who had nothing more to be surprised at. Their father was seated on the sofa, and beside him, flushed, tearful, and yet smiling, her hand in his, was their auntie—Aunt Hede. Caroline whispered something in Mariechen's ear and then vanished, closing the door behind her. The child stood still for an instant, then she ran to Hede, who raised her to her lap, laughing and crying.

"Are you really going to be my mamma?" the little one asked.

"Yes!" cried the head forester. "She is going to stay with us always, and this is my Christmas present to you, children, a new mamma!" And he rose and, lifting the boy, placed him beside Hede, and then drew the older girl toward him. "You were most in need of a mother," he said to her gently, "aren't you glad?"

But the child only buried her face in his breast and began to cry.

"It was what I wished for on my birthday," she sobbed.

"And now listen! The Christ-child is not going to bring you anything to-night; I must take Aunt Hede home, and she must tell her brother that she is to be your mamma. To-morrow we will both light the Christmas tree for you. You must go to bed like good children now, and think of to-morrow."

The prospect of having Aunt Hede with them always, reconciled the children to the postponement, and a few moments later, Günther and Hede Kerkow were walking side by side through the dusky night.

"Hede," he said, taking her hand in his and speaking in a repressed tone, "I fear you have a hard task before you—your brother——"

"Have no fears on that score—he does not need me," she answered, but her heart beat fast.

"I am very grateful to you, very grateful," he said softly in parting. "I hope you will never regret what you have done."

"And I am grateful to you," she answered in a clear, glad voice. "You do not know how poor and homeless I was, how rich I am now, how much I love you."

He tried to draw her to him, but she held him back.

"Much more than you love me," she added softly, "much more!"

"No!" he retorted.

"Do you mean it?"

"Yes, Hedwig! I have told you all; you do not know how I have longed for you all this time."

"But——"

She turned and looked down at the house where Aenne May was sleeping.

"That? That has all been fought out, Hede; my heart is at peace now; I am happy and content."

"Good-bye," she murmured, "until to-morrow! Good-bye!"

They looked into each other's eyes for a moment, then he drew her to him and kissed her.

CHAPTER XXVII.

HEINZ, who was usually unconscious as to whether his sister were in the room with him or not, missed her to-day. Perhaps it was the Christmas tree that recalled the happy days of their childhood spent together. He waited, impatient at first, then uneasy; he knocked several times at her door—there was no response.

He could scarcely wonder at her seeking a more genial atmosphere than that which prevailed here, but to-night was Christmas Eve. And where could she be? At the Mays', perhaps. But it was not like her to intrude into domestic privacy on such an evening. Possibly she had some poor to care for. He remembered that whenever he had seen her of late she had had some sort of sewing in hand. She might even be with her former charges; and why not, had it been any night but Christmas Eve?

The ringing of the church bells had been filling the room for a quarter of an hour, and Heinz had been listlessly watching the church-goers as they climbed the hill. Heini was weary of looking at picture-books. Heinz had given him a round dozen instead of toys, for which he cared nothing. The child had asked for a story, but his father could not sit still for uneasiness. As he paced to and fro he

told the boy of the Christmases of his own boyhood days, how Otilie and Hede used to meet him at the railway station on his home-coming from school, and how they had scarcely been able to restrain themselves until the door of the room where the Christmas tree stood were thrown open.

"Why isn't Aunt Otilie with us?" asked Heini.

"She is sick."

"What is the matter with her?"

"You wouldn't understand, my darling."

The child was silent, and Heinz's thoughts returned to the days when he had been spoiled by his sisters, Hede especially; she had been particularly ingenious in finding ways of expressing her affection. How they had romped and laughed together; how earnestly she had talked to him about the wife he would have some day, and how willingly she had given him her last groschen at the end of the month when his own pockets were empty! And now—now they scarcely spoke to each other, and she was away on Christmas Eve——

It was his fault; he felt it plainly. He was in the wrong. He had voluntarily estranged her who, next to his child, was dearest to him. When she returned, he would beg her to have patience with him, beg her to help him to go on enduring his lot. He would confess everything to her, how he had suffered, how he had worked, how he had lost the courage to continue the struggle. With her help he would make a man of himself again.

His meditations were interrupted by Heini's asking suddenly,—

"Don't you hope Aunt Hede will come soon?"

"I do, indeed, Heini, and we will ask her to stay with us every evening after this."

"Yes, papa; but why haven't you asked her before?"

Heinz was confused.

"Auntie had presents to make," he said, uncertainly. "But we will ask her to stay with us now, and we will read and play Halma, and we will have the piano brought in here, and auntie will sing to us. Would you like that?"

"So much, papa!" answered the little fellow, and his eyes sparkled.

Just then there was a knock at the door and Hede entered.

Heinz did not answer her "Good-evening." He was staring at her in amazement. She looked as she had looked fifteen years ago, so fresh, so pretty, so young. Her dark hair had become loosened and curled softly about her forehead; her lips were parted in an embarrassed smile, showing her white teeth—what miracle had been wrought?

"You are not vexed, Heinz?" she asked, going to him and clasping his arm.

He shook his head.

"Have you been waiting for me?"

"Yes," Heini broke in, "we have been waiting a long time for you and we have something to ask you."

She glanced from one to the other and her smile died away.

"We want to ask you to stay with us every even-

ing. You oughtn't to sit all alone in your room, papa says, and we are going to have the piano moved in here."

Hede made no reply, but glanced questioningly at Heinz, who was looking at her with a question in his own eyes. Suddenly the color flamed into her cheeks.

"Heinz," she began at last, going to him and laying her hand on his shoulder, "Heinz, I have something to tell you. I—you know how little happiness there has been in my life—or, perhaps you do not know! Chance or necessity, whichever you will, drove me to the house where I was to find not a small but a very great measure of happiness. Heinz, I accepted it when it was offered me to-day. I am free, for you—you do not need me—I have seen it during the six months I have been here. And so I have promised to become Günther's wife."

He had grown very pale and involuntarily he fell back a pace, so that her hand slipped from his shoulder. But as he looked into her startled, questioning eyes, he stretched out his hand.

"You did quite right," he answered with an effort, "quite right. I congratulate you with all my heart!"

"He is coming to-morrow to ask you——"

"There is no need of it. You are your own mistress, child!" he broke in. "But—of course I shall be glad to see him, very glad. And if I can be useful to you, in any way, Hede, you know—you have done right, quite right!" He held out his hand

to her once more. "I am tired and I have a slight headache ; good-night, and pleasant dreams !"

She left the room, deeply moved.

"Isn't auntie going to stay here, papa?" asked Heini, after a while.

He had not understood the meaning of what had passed.

"No, Heini," he answered, and all the pent-up bitterness in his soul was expressed in the words. "No, Heini, she cares more for the little Günthers than she does for us ; she is going to be their mamma."

Once more his resolutions had come too late. He kissed his boy—he at least was still left him.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE nightingales were again singing in the park at Breitenfels; they were there in greater numbers than ever, for there was now nothing to disturb them in these deserted gardens. The windows of the castle remained closed, the furniture covered; the guards yawned at their posts, the few remaining officials yawned at their desks, and the two horses in the ducal stables yawned, too, in their own fashion while they stood in their stalls till their legs grew stiff. The governor, the coachman said, seemed to have forgotten that he had a carriage at his disposal. The last time the horses had been harnessed was on the day when his sister had been married to the head forester.

And what a wedding it was! They had been married in the church at ten o'clock in the morning in the presence of only the bride's brother and the steward; then, after a sandwich and a glass of champagne in the former's rooms, the newly-married pair had stepped into the carriage and had been driven to their new home. At New Year the head forester had suddenly been removed to Wolsrode, a lonely hunting-seat in the midst of extensive forests, not far from the capital; and a new head forester was in the house.

The young doctor was still at the Mays' and, indeed, he had no cause to regret his choice of lodgings. Not only was there no neater house in the town, or better coffee or fresher butter anywhere to be found, but there was yet another attraction for the young man in the shape of his landlady's pretty daughter.

Aenne had grown pale and quiet; this life of inaction weighed heavily upon her. She had not been able to sing during the time of their mourning; she had made an attempt once, and her mother had been so shocked at what she called her daughter's lack of piety, that Aenne had not opened the instrument again.

She had made no effort to overcome Mrs. May's prejudice. She went about the house as though she had never left it, as though she had never tasted the triumphs the world had to offer. But Aunt Emilie could see how the child was suffering mentally and physically, and one day there came a change. Aenne was in the garden, superintending the hanging out of the parlor curtains, when Aunt Emilie stuck her head between the flapping draperies and beckoned to her. Aenne let the curtain that she was just about to hang on the line fall into the basket again, and followed her aunt to her room. To her astonishment, the old lady pressed a key into her hand and said, turning away her head,—

"There, my darling, there—I couldn't bear it any longer."

"What is it?" asked Aenne.

"The key to your music-room," was the proud answer.

"But, auntie, tell me—I don't understand——"

"It's simple enough! I have rented a room in the Castle Louise from the forester's wife, and have sent to Brendenburg for a piano—only hired it, you know—indeed, child, I couldn't look on and see you suffer so; what you were enduring was worse than starvation. Your music is on its way from Dresden. Don't tell your mother, or there will be an end of everything. I will take all the responsibility upon myself."

Aenne could have cried aloud for joy, but she only threw her arms about the old lady's neck.

"Oh, you dear, good auntie!" she exclaimed. "How can I ever thank you!"

She was downstairs again like a flash, finished her work, was upstairs again, changed her dress, and put the key in her pocket. With her hat in her hand she hurried across the castle square, through the gateway, past the pond and up the hill. She knocked breathlessly at the forester's lodgings, a neat-looking woman opened the door for her and led her to a room across the hall. As she opened the door, Aenne's eyes fell upon a piano that stood diagonally across the room; bunches of flowers were placed in the empty candlesticks, and flowers were scattered broadcast about the apartment. The walls and arched ceiling were tinted a pale yellow, and the beeches outside the window gave a soft, greenish tone to the sunlight as it fell through the clear panes. The forester's wife had gone, but she paused

outside the door and listened as the sweet tones sounded from within. Song followed song. Like one parched with thirst who cannot drink his fill, Aenne sang on into the golden twilight.

A storm was brewing at Mrs. May's. Doctor Lehmann was to be their guest that evening for the first time, and Aenne had forgotten it. Her mother, who had hitherto been unable to deduce anything, either favorable or otherwise, from Aenne's manner toward the doctor, could not but interpret this as a bad sign, and the barometer of her spirits fell accordingly.

"Don't for goodness' sake begin your wanderings about the woods again! You're not a school-girl any longer!" were the words that greeted Aenne on her return.

"I won't stay away so long again, mamma," Aenne replied. "But I can't give up my walks. You know how father used to insist upon them."

She flushed as she said this, for she was ashamed of the deception, and hastened to atone for it by added amiability; she was even quite talkative with the doctor, and her mother's drooping spirits revived.

"You were at the castle to-day, were you not?" the old lady asked the doctor.

"Yes, I was at the castle," was the rejoinder.

"At the Kerkows?"

"Yes, at the Kerkows."

"To see the child?"

"To see the child."

"Is he in a bad way?"

The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

"Let me drink your health, Mrs. May!" he said raising his glass.

"What made me think so," she persisted, "was your being sent for such a hurry."

At this juncture the little maid-servant appeared and called Mrs. May out; a moment later, Aunt Emilie was summoned. Aenne was left alone with their guest who was gazing at her through his glasses with an expression of ardent admiration in his round black eyes.

"Will you not tell me how the little fellow is?" she asked, at last.

"Ah, Miss Aenne, it's a sad case! I am anxious enough about the son, but the father gives me even greater concern."

"Is Mr. von Kerkow ill?" she asked, with seeming composure, but her heart beat fast.

"It is a case of complete *Abutie*."

"What is that?"

"A species of mental disease."

She changed color suddenly.

"How does the disease show itself?" she asked.

"In extreme apathy, indifference and melancholy."

"But you must help him, doctor!" she burst out.

"I?" He gave a short laugh. "He won't listen to what I say; other influences must be brought to bear on him. His state is hardly to be wondered at. Governor of the castle of Breitenfels for over seven years, and all his other troubles added! I should have gone mad long ago! It's too late now for him to rouse himself and there is no one who can give him a helping hand. I said to him a short time ago,

‘Why, in Heaven’s name, don’t you throw up your position and go out into the world—as a railway guard, if nothing better offers? You must have a change of surroundings, or it’ll be all up with you!’ And what do you suppose his answer was? He only looked across at the child’s bed, as though the unfortunate little chap could not find a home with some one, his aunt, for instance. But he is as unreasonable in this regard as a morbidly anxious mother. He has not consulted me in respect to himself, so I bear no responsibility. And now let us drop the subject, Miss Aenne; it isn’t in keeping with these delightful surroundings! Just see the moon beginning to peep through the pear trees and shining in through the window! If Storm were still alive, he would make a poem out of it. And we two sitting here together so closely——”

Just then the mother returned with a glass dish in which quivered something yellow, and behind her came Aunt Emilie with a tankard of raspberry shrub. Mrs. May excused herself with bewildering volubility for her absence. While speaking, she glanced covertly from the doctor, whose eyes were shining, to Aenne, who sat silent and pale. At all events, the first step toward a declaration had been taken.

After supper they sauntered about in the garden. Mrs. May detached herself from the others under the pretext of examining the gooseberry bushes, and she grew furious at Aunt Emilie, who remained with the young people and was deaf to Mrs. May’s coughs and signs.

“Emilie! Emilie!” she called frantically at last.

"Come here, come here—I am caught fast in the bushes!"

But instead of Aunt Emilie, Aenne came running to her in alarm.

"What is it, mother?" she asked.

"I have gotten free," grumbled the disappointed old lady. "You can go back again."

"Mother," said the girl, pressing her hand to her temples, "I must leave the doctor to you. My head aches and I must go in."

Mrs. May was about to break into a torrent of reproach, to the effect that people ought to learn how to control themselves, when she caught sight of her daughter's white and altered face.

"This is what comes of roaming about the woods! I suppose you've been sitting for hours on the damp ground! Go in if you must; if it proves to be anything serious, we have a doctor in the house."

Aunt Emilie and the doctor, who were just coming up the walk, saw Aenne's slight figure disappear into the house. Her mother wished to speak with the doctor alone, and it was not difficult to get rid of Aunt Emilie.

"Emilie," she said, "won't you go and see if there's anything the matter with Aenne's throat?"

The doctor was filled to overflowing with wishes, hopes, and plans for the future. It needed only a word from Mrs. May to loosen his tongue, and the flood of passionate declaration that burst from the stout little man's lips astonished even the old lady herself.

"My dear doctor," she said, much moved, when he

had done, "you know how much I think of you; you can count upon me. And now you must try your fortune with Aenne."

He stopped and polished his glasses, and his round, short-sighted eyes gazed about in a helpless fashion.

"Yes, my dear lady, but it's a devilishly—I beg your pardon—a very difficult business," he stammered. "Miss Aenne will not understand me—purposely, I think. I—you can guess that a man does not like to risk a refusal, and before I venture upon a declaration, I want to feel certain of being heard. I have ventured to hope that you would use your influence—you know my hopes; I place my fate in your hands."

"Have you not spoken to Aenne, doctor?"

"I tried to," he answered, "but, as I have already said, she will not understand me."

"I will speak to her," said the mother.

When she entered the bedroom which she shared with Aenne, Aunt Emilie rose from a chair beside the bed and raised her finger to her lips. The mother bent over her child, and could see, in the moonlight, that she had been crying.

She had understood the doctor, she thought to herself, and she crept into bed so quietly that, had Aenne really been asleep, she would not have wakened. Then the old lady fell asleep and dreamed of bridal veils and myrtle and white satin.

She awoke once during the night, and saw Aenne sitting upright in bed, immovable, her hands clasped about her knees, staring into the darkness. The mother watched her for a few moments, thinking

that the time had come for her to speak; but as she was about to open her lips, Aenne lay down again.

“Aenne!” whispered the mother.

She received no reply. She fell asleep again at last, and the clock was striking five when she awoke the next morning. Her first glance was toward Aenne’s bed—it was empty.

CHAPTER XXIX.

As long as she lived, Aenne would never forget that night. She had gone through many bitter experiences during her short life; she had seen the man she loved and who, she thought, loved her, turn suddenly from her to another. In her outraged love and pride she had flung herself into the arms of another man, and had realized with horror the consequences of her desperate step. She had been forced to see a good man who loved her made unhappy through her; she had undergone the struggle with her parents over her independence; she had lost her father, and, for the sake of her mother, had given up the career that had been a solace to her; she had grieved over the unhappy lot of the man she loved; but the news of him that had come to her last night had been the hardest of all to bear.

Her old love for him flamed up anew and only one thought possessed her: he must not be lost—he must not! Heinz Kerkow, once so gay and merry-hearted, her old playmate, her love—it could not be, it must not be! She summoned up all her old, defiant spirit to her aid against what was driving her to him. What is it to you? He has scorned you and your love! In vain! He must be saved—but how? And ever clearer, ever more certain did it

become to her. You can, you must! Go to him and speak to him in the old spirit of comradeship!

And once more her proud heart rose in rebellion. No, no! He might think that you are begging for his love a second time, now that he is free. She would rather die! But the thought would not leave her. Go to him, he needs a friendly hand! If a stranger were walking on the edge of a precipice, without knowing his danger, would you not warn him, and will you let the man to whom your whole heart belongs perish miserably?

But he can come to you, urged her pride.

No, you know that he is ill! He cannot help himself—you must help him!

But how? By writing to him? The doctor had told her that Heinz no longer opened any letters except official ones. No, she must see him, intercept him, speak to him!

But what should she say? She did not know; chance would help her to find some word that would strike home.

Sleep did not come to her during all that night, and as soon as the day broke, she crept from the room and went out into the garden. It lay in full sunshine, and the dew glittered on every leaf and every blade of grass. She forgot wholly that she was not dressed for a walk, but wore an old black and white print frock; the skirt had grown a trifle short for her and the blouse and sailor collar gave a childish air to her figure. She had arranged her hair hastily, and it hung in two heavy braids down her back, very much as she had liked to wear it

when Aunt Emilie and Heinz and she had taken their long walks together through the forest. Her steps turned involuntarily toward the woodland path that led to the Castle Louise. The wife of the forester was standing at the door, staring at her in surprise.

"Why, Miss May, I didn't know you in that school-girl's dress!" she exclaimed. "Good-morning! Are you going to sing so early?"

Aenne started.

"Yes," she said, after a moment's reflection. "I shall not disturb you, shall I?"

"No, indeed not! My husband went into the forest long ago, and my mother-in-law—she is sick, but she is stone deaf and won't hear a sound."

Aenne hastened to her piano. She had been playing for some time when there came a knock, and the forester's wife entered.

"Mr von Kerkow and his little son are coming across the terrace," she said; "the child has a glass of goat's milk here every morning. I thought I had better tell you; but they won't disturb you—they won't come in here."

Aenne stood up hastily; she could feel her heart beating in her throat.

"But they will disturb me," she exclaimed. "Cannot I get away without——"

"Here they are!" whispered the woman. "Stay here quietly; they won't stay long. As soon as the little fellow has drunk his milk, they will go on into the forest."

"Don't let any one in here!" Aenne said, imperiously.

"I won't, I won't!" answered the forester's wife, reassuringly, looking curiously at Aenne's white face.

A weak, childish voice called her name and she hurried out. Aenne heard the key turned in the lock and then withdrawn.

The young girl sat trembling before the piano and listened.

"Come into the sitting-room, if you please, sir," said the forester's wife. "The parlor floor has been scrubbed and the boards are still wet."

The invalid chair was wheeled into the adjoining room, and Aenne was separated from the others by only a thin partition. She could hear every word her hostess said as distinctly as though she were in the same room. Suddenly she gave a start—that was his voice! It almost caused her physical pain, and she clutched involuntarily at her heart.

"Doesn't it taste good to you, Heini? Drink a little, darling."

"I can't, papa. I've had enough and my head aches so."

"But you haven't eaten anything this morning," Heinz urged.

"Don't tease him to drink, sir," said the forester's wife compassionately.

Just then Aenne heard rapid steps crossing the hall, a sharp knock at the door, and the familiar voice of the doctor.

"At your service, my good woman! Ah, and

here is my little patient—good-morning, Mr. von Kerkow—good-morning, my little man! Well, how how are we? I can kill two birds with one stone now! I will see your mother-in-law afterward, my good woman, and now you can leave us for a while. Put a fresh cap on the old lady and open the windows. I like my patients to look nice and have plenty of fresh air.”

With a hearty laugh the woman left the room, closing the door behind her, and silence reigned for a time.

Then the doctor's voice was raised again, as he called into the hall,—

“Good woman, come and push this little man up and down before the house awhile!” And scarcely had the sound of the wheels died away on the stone flags of the hall when his voice sounded again. “I cannot conceal from you, Mr. von Kerkow, that the child has altered noticeably during the past few days. Things cannot go on like this; the boy must have a change—don't start so! I know that you are doing everything possible for the child, but the atmosphere of resignation in which you are slowly going to ruin cannot but prove fatal to him. I am interested in the little fellow—as a physician, you understand—and I have a proposition to make to you. Intrust him to me for a month or two—will you?”

Heinz murmured something in reply.

“You are quite right; I have no wife, but neither have you. The advantage I have over you is that I am a physician, that such troubles have always aroused my particular interest, and that I have been

in a position to make a special study of their treatment. I used to be resident physician of the children's ward at our city hospital, and I will see that the child has the best of care; Sister Victoria is an excellent nurse. You must remember, too, Mr. von Kerkow, that I am lodging with the doctor's widow, who takes a keen interest in a plan I have of establishing a sanitarium here for children afflicted with rachitis. Lastly, there is Miss May, who, I am sure, would find many spare hours to devote to the little fellow, for she has a heart of gold, and besides—but that's nothing here or there; I only mean——”

Aenne had risen and was standing with head bent forward, a glad light in her eyes. Heaven itself seemed about to further her wishes.

“Thank you,” came the answer. “I do not like to impose upon people's kindness, and I do not understand why Miss May should take so much interest in a stranger's child.”

“Why? Heavens, man, why does one ever want to help any one else? It is human nature, and a girl of her nobility of character could not feel otherwise!” cried the doctor indignantly. “But as you please, my dear sir, as you please! The child is yours; let him go to perdition, if you like—I meant it for the best! Good-morning, Mr. von Kerkow!”

Then came the sound of hurried steps, a violent slamming of the door, a call for the forester's wife, and silence again.

Aenne had sunk back upon her music stool, her face white, her hands clasped in her lap. Heinz von Kerkow's words had awakened within her the old

spirit of defiance, which love and pity had lulled to sleep. A man who could speak like this had never loved, and she, she in her boundless, self-sacrificing love for him and his child, had been on the point of laying herself open to a harsh repulse. She threw back her head proudly—fool, fool that she had been!

She closed the lid of the instrument, put on her hat, and turned the door knob. She was locked in! She frowned and looked about the room impatiently. She could not knock, for Mr. von Kerkow might still be sitting in the adjoining room. Her eye fell upon the open window. With a quick spring, she was on the low casement, and the next instant, on the terrace outside. She halted under the fir-trees, breathing fast; by making a short detour through the forest she could escape unobserved.

But Aenne had forgotten that this by-path joined the main avenue that led to the Castle Louise, and on turning into the avenue out of the deep shadow, she came face to face with Doctor Lehmann. He was walking rapidly, swinging his stick, his hat on the back of his head. At sight of her, his angry expression gave way to delighted surprise.

"Ah, Miss Aenne," he stammered, raising his straw hat, "it promises to be a red-letter day, indeed, when one meets such a vision so early in the morning! Will you let me walk with you? I am on my way home; it's almost time for my office hours, and one must live, that is—attend to one's inner man. Have you breakfasted?"

"No," the young girl answered briefly.

"Can't we have breakfast together in your gar-

den?" he begged. "It would be a fine idea. And how is your headache? Did you sleep well? Has your mother spoken to you—that is, have you seen your mother this morning?" he amended, growing red.

"I was asleep when she went to bed last night. When I came out this morning, she was not awake."

"Ah, indeed! There was something she wished to say to you, I believe," he stammered. "But there's no use talking about it now; let us have breakfast together, and then, Miss Aenne, after my office hours, perhaps you will tell me——"

She looked at him half wonderingly, half absently.

"Tell you what?"

"How you like the story your mother has to tell you."

She listened without interest to what he was saying, and did not reply. Her thoughts had returned to Heinz von Kerkow's bitter words. She was still preoccupied when she entered the house before him and said good-morning to Mrs. May, who had been watching the approaching pair delightedly from the window.

But the old lady had not the courage to convince herself of the truth. She only peered through the curtains at the young couple as they sat at breakfast in the garden, and watched the doctor's eyes which hardly left the young girl's face. Aenne sat half-turned away, and was throwing crumbs to the chickens on the other side of the wire fence. When the doctor rose to go to his office, the mother could

endure it no longer and, taking a bowl of spinach and a knife, she joined her daughter in the garden.

"Aenne," she began, sorting the leaves with trembling fingers, "Aenne——"

The girl turned toward her mother like one aroused from sleep.

"What is it, mother?"

"I——" her mother's breath suddenly failed her. "Oh, you slyboots—you know very well what I mean!"

"What, mother?"

"Didn't the doctor say anything to you?"

Aenne had to stop and collect herself.

"Ah, yes, there was something you wanted to tell me, he said. What is it?"

"Didn't he give you a hint?"

Aenne shook her head.

"Just like a man," thought the mother. "If I only knew how to lead up to the subject in a way to touch the child."

"What a fine young man the doctor is, isn't he, Aenne?" she began, aloud.

"I know very little about him, but I am sure he is a good man," assented Aenne. Suddenly she remembered his enthusiastic praise of her, that she had overheard that morning. The color rose to her face.

"What makes you blush so?" asked her mother, laughing. "You suspect what I am going to say to you? I see you do, you know that the poor fellow has fallen head over ears in love with you, and——"

"Mother!" cried Aenne, but she could get no

further, a new fear had crept into her eyes at the mention of this new suitor. "You must not joke about such things, mother," she added, falteringly.

"Heaven forbid!" cried the old lady, eagerly. "It is the truth, child, as true as I sit here. I have seen it for a long time, and last night he begged me to speak to you for him. Love has made a perfect child of him. It is true, Aenneken, he wants to marry you and—you have known it yourself for a long time, you slyboots, you!"

"And you gave him hope?" asked the girl standing before her mother, drawn up to her full height.

"Why not? What is the use of waiting, child? Only think of it, he is a clever physician, has a good income, and he loves you madly—and I thought——"

"Mother!" burst out the girl, "you ought not to have encouraged him, you had no right to do it!"

Her mother set down the bowl and flung the knife into it.

"I cannot believe that you can be so foolish, to put it mildly, Aenne," she stammered. "Come, let us talk the matter over quietly," and she drew her daughter to the farther end of the garden, "let us go into the arbor, no one can overhear us there."

Aenne suffered herself to be led, but she trembled in every limb. She had been drawn into the midst of the conflict again; was it never to end? Her mother pushed her down upon the rustic seat and stood before her with forced composure.

"Remember that I am a widow and that you are a penniless girl," she began with unwonted gentle-

ness. "You may not be able to give him a great deal of love, but you cannot help respecting him, you cannot help recognizing his worth and his diligence. You are old enough now to realize the value of such qualities, and you have seen an example of a love match in the Kerkows' marriage. The career of singer or teacher is only a last resort for a girl who cannot find a husband, and, dear child, it would be a positive crime not to accept this good fortune that has come to you. Although you have had some experience in the great world, thank God, you have never yet had occasion to know how hard life is for a solitary woman."

She began to sob as she ended, and dried her tears with the corner of her apron.

These words fell upon Aenne's bowed head with a benumbing force, and were all the more effective because of the unusual gentleness with which they were uttered. She knew also that her mother would never forgive her for this second refusal, but she must say no.

She stood up.

"Come, mother, I will tell Dr. Lehmann the reasons for my refusal. I will not place that unpleasant task upon you—or, I will write him."

"You will not marry him?" screamed her mother, flinging aside all her gentleness.

"I cannot, mother! Be kind, I entreat you! I love you very dearly, but do not ask me to make myself unhappy!"

So saying, she walked past her mother and, resolved to bring the matter to an end as speedily as

possible, directed her steps toward the doctor's waiting-room.

When the last patient had departed and the young man's eyes fell upon Aenne as she stood pale and determined beside the instrument stand, his heart almost ceased beating.

"You wish to speak to me?" he faltered.

"Yes, doctor, but I shall not detain you long, I know that you are busy."

She passed on into the room once so dear to her, where she had so often crept to give her father a kiss or to confide to him her little troubles. For the first time the full realization of her lonely and unprotected lot rushed over her.

The young doctor pointed to a chair beside his desk and sat awaiting her communication with a very white face, drumming nervously the while upon the surface of the desk with his fingers.

"My mother has told me the story you spoke of, doctor," she began, "forgive me if I must say that it can never come true. It makes me very unhappy to think that I am giving you pain, and I will tell you frankly the reason for my refusal. I love some one else and can never forget him. More you will not ask me. You have the right to expect that the woman you marry should give you her entire heart. I have only one thing to ask of you, if you can give it to me, by and by—your friendship. I know that you are a good man and will understand my refusal."

She held out her hand to him and he took it hesitatingly and pressed a helpless kiss upon it, then without a word he walked past her to the window.

She lingered a moment, looking at him sadly.

"Do not make it too hard for mother," she pleaded as she left him.

When Doctor Lehmann returned from his round of visits toward evening, he found a third messenger from the castle, summoning him to the sick child without delay.

"Tell Herr von Kerkow that I will be there in ten minutes," he said to the servant.

Aenne was in the garden walking slowly up and down. She was not thinking of the stout little doctor, she was still struggling with her love that had been so cruelly wounded by the bitter words—How does it happen that Miss May takes such an interest in a stranger's child? This one word "stranger" had disavowed at one blow all connection with her, and had been a proof that she had never been anything more to him than a passing fancy.

And over this little world that hid so much grief and suffering, the scent of the lilacs hung with intoxicating sweetness and hill and forest, castle and town were bathed in the silver moonlight that made the blossoming apple trees seem clothed in dazzling white. From the head gardener's garden came the notes of a zither accompanying a woman's voice.

Aenne stood still and listened awhile. Then her thoughts returned to Heinz. What could have happened at the castle? Was the little one worse?

She gave a short, abrupt laugh. What was the "stranger's child" to her?

She resumed her walk along the main path that

led from the house to the arbor. As she approached the house the doctor came hurrying in at the front door.

"Miss Aenne," he called from the hall. "Miss Aenne!"

She stopped in alarm. What could he want of her?

He was already standing at the garden door.

"Ah, there you are, Miss Aenne. Can you bring yourself to do a favor to such a presumptuous fellow as I am? I know you are generous and will forget for a few hours what has happened to-day and help me as a sister would. That poor little unfortunate up at the castle must be operated upon—an abscess in the throat with danger of suffocation. Kerkow seems paralyzed, and Sister Victoria has left Breitenfels. Throw something over you and come with me; on the way I will tell you what you will have to do. It's a matter of life and death. Please hurry; I will be with you in a moment with my instruments; take an apron with you."

He was gone.

Aenne drew herself up. What is a "stranger's child" to me? she felt like crying. Stronger than the pain of her wounded heart, the smart of her injured pride stirred within her.

"Are you not coming?" the doctor asked, returning with his case under his arm. "You must. I demand this first proof of friendship of you in the name of humanity."

But she was already at his side and they hurried together through the hall.

Up at the castle Heinz von Kerkow stood at the

bedside of his darling who lay writhing in agony. So rapidly had the treacherous disease developed, that only an operation could save the child.

The father's mind was so dazed that he had not yet realized the full extent of this fresh calamity. He had scarcely understood the doctor's orders to provide warm water, a table, clean towels, well-trimmed lamps, and he watched the maid making these preparations as though they concerned some other child, not his.

Then the door opened suddenly and following the doctor came a slight figure, and a pair of sweet, sad eyes rested upon the child. Heinz fell back and steadied himself against a table; the young girl came toward him and said in a voice that showed what an effort it was for her to speak,—

“Herr von Kerkow, there is no other woman's aid at hand; I trust you will let me help the doctor as far as I can. I will be as careful as though the little one were not”—“a stranger's child”—she had almost said, but at the sight of the broken man before her, the words refused to come.

“Thank you,” he said with difficulty. “Thank you.”

“Will you be good enough to leave us, Herr von Kerkow,” said the doctor. “I will let you know as soon as possible when you can return. I do not like to have relatives present at an operation,” he added as Heinz hesitated.

He led the father to the door. Heinz sat down in the room his sister had formerly occupied, folded his hands on his knees, and waited, motionless.

Would the child die, the dear little sharer of his lonely life? "A last resort" the doctor had said—hideous thought! Even though nothing but a poor little cripple, the child was all in all to him—all in all.

The moments seemed to stretch into eternity before he was summoned and when the doctor came for him at last, he entered the dimly-lighted sick-room on tiptoe. At the side of the little patient who seemed to be asleep, sat Aenne who raised her finger to her lips to enjoin silence.

"Miss May is to spend the night here," said the doctor, "and will remain until a sister comes from Brendenburg. You undoubtedly have a room and a bed here for me. I want to be within call during the next few hours. I will only go home to change my clothes and will return at once. You can lie down, Herr von Kerkow, or, if you want to remain close at hand, there is probably a sofa or an easy chair in the next room."

Heinz went obediently into the adjoining apartment and flung himself into a chair from which he could see the child's bed. A deathly silence reigned in the lofty rooms. The night-lamp cast its flickering light upon the slender figure that sat watching at the foot of the bed, the head thrown back, resting against the chair, the beautiful face turned upward, immovable, the large eyes wide open. Every now and then the dark eyes would turn for a moment with a look of boundless gentleness and pity to the sleeping child and then would grow fixed again in painful meditation.

And this was Aenne May who was watching at the bedside of his child. Was it a dream? Had she really taken pity upon his boy?

In the profound stillness, broken only by the striking of the church clock, Heinz caught sight of the doctor who had returned and was bending over Aenne; he suddenly remembered the doctor's enthusiastic praise of Aenne's character that morning and a quick sense of uneasiness seized him which reached its culminating point as he bethought himself of what the forester's wife had said of the rumor that Miss May was to marry the doctor. He smiled bitterly. Aenne had been the first happiness that had slipped through his fingers, one blow had followed another, and now this: his child was to die! Thus he sat in silent despair—for how long, he knew not.

The young girl had not moved all this time; but, suddenly, he saw her kneel down beside the bed, examine the child's face anxiously. Then rise hastily and hurry to the door of the next room and knock. The next instant the doctor appeared carrying a lighted candle which he handed to Aenne while he bent over the child; then he straightened himself and looked at the young girl with a shrug of the shoulder and a gesture that made Heinz leap to his feet. In an instant he was standing at the opposite side of the bed, with a ghastly, distorted face.

"What is the matter with Heini?" he gasped.

"Herr von Kerkow," answered the doctor, with deep emotion, "the little fellow has fallen asleep, without pain, without a struggle." He went up to the man whose eyes rested uncomprehendingly upon

the still little form, and laid his hand upon his shoulder. "I know what it means to you, Herr von Kerkow," he said, "but I know also how much pain and suffering the poor little fellow has been spared. Do not think of yourself. Be thankful that he is at rest; his life would have been one long torment."

Aenne stood by, pale and with downcast eyes. She could find no words to express what she felt, Heinz von Kerkow turned short about and left the room.

The two who remained behind looked at each other questioningly.

"We must not leave him alone, Miss Aenne," whispered the doctor. "The poor little fellow is released from his sufferings, thank God, but now that this man has nothing more in the world to live for, he is capable of putting an end to himself!"

"What are we to do?" she cried, clasping her hands together in anguish.

Dr Lehmann suddenly grasped her hand and led her to one of the window recesses. He flung open the shutters so that the whole moonlight-steeped landscape spread out below them and the aromatic odors of the spring night and the music of the nightingales in the lilac bushes penetrated into the chamber of death.

Thus they stood, silent, and quite a long time passed before the doctor spoke, Aenne could feel his hand tremble as it still held hers in a close grasp.

"Miss Aenne," he began at last, controlling himself with difficulty. "What if I know who the man is whom you cannot forget?"

She drew her hand away quickly and her eyes flashed through her tears.

"Herr Doctor!" she exclaimed.

"Forgive me!" he answered. "Your mother unconsciously betrayed your secret in her anger and disappointment at the failure of her plans. "You have taken her to the castle!" she cried, when I went back this evening. "You have done well to take her to the man for whose sake she refuses all other offers!" It is none of my business, you will say, perhaps—very well, I know it. But a doctor must think of the good of his patients even if it breaks his own miserable heart. Miss Aenne, since you love this man with the love that only a woman is capable of, take pity upon him and save him from himself!"

Her back was half turned toward him, but he could see how she was trembling, how she was striving to control herself.

"What shall I do?" she burst out at last, without turning.

"Surely, you do not need to ask me that, Aenne! When did a man ever know the right course in such a case? A woman who loves can alone tell. You know what he needs—freedom, work, new energy, courage; restore him to his true self. A loving woman can do that. How? That must be your care. And now I will leave you; I must get some sleep before going to my other patients."

He nodded to her with a quivering face, caught up his hat and stick and left the room.

Aenne remained standing where he left her, her hands grasping the casement. Behind her slept the

little one in his last sleep. It was so still that it seemed to her that she could hear the beating of her own heart.

“Oh, God, have pity upon me,” she prayed, “show me the way to help him!”

In the adjoining room, Heinz von Kerkow was pacing to and fro. He felt like a castaway alone in the midst of the waters—nothing but solitude about him, hideous, unbroken solitude; it was useless to go on struggling against the waves, his strength was failing. Better to sink beneath them and find peace—anything rather than to go on struggling.

Aenne listened for an hour or more to the restless footfalls; then they ceased; a cupboard was opened, drawers pulled out and closed and then—she drew far back behind the window curtains and watched with eyes filled with dread—then the door opened and Heinz crossed the threshold and looked about him. Thinking that the room was empty, he entered, walked with resolute steps to the door that led to the corridor, locked it and returned to the side of his dead child. He stood for a moment, staring gloomily at the little body, then thrust his hand into his breast pocket, kneeled down beside the bed and raised his revolver.

At the same instant a light figure darted forward, a firm hand grasped his arm, and a clear woman's voice cried,—

“Since when have you become a coward, Heinz von Kerkow?”

At the first flush of dawn Aenne returned to her

home. The front door was still locked, the shutters were closed. A window in the doctor's room was the only one open and the young man's face appeared behind the curtains as Aenne called to him and asked him to let her in.

"How is he? Have you spoken to him? How is he bearing it?" he whispered as she entered.

"Like a man," answered Aenne, pressing the young doctor's hand in passing.

More than this, neither her aunt nor her mother learned anything concerning Mr. von Kerkow. But Aenne learned something; neither more nor less than that she was at liberty to take up her career again and in company with Aunt Emilie. When the latter had offered to remain with her sister-in-law, the only answer she received was,—

"I'm much obliged, but I have already telegraphed to Lieschen Weidner; she is coming to me for good—as my daughter. You can now live as you like in Dresden and need have no concern about me."

With an impenetrable face, the old lady packed Aenne's belongings and added almost more in the way of linen than she could well spare, as though determined to lay herself open to no possibility of reproach. And when Aenne and Aunt Emilie returned from Heini's funeral, not only was everything in readiness for their departure, but at Aenne's plate lay an envelope containing a thousand-mark note. "Your mother's legacy" was written upon it in large characters.

"Mamma!" exclaimed Aenne deeply hurt.
"What does this mean?"

"Take it and then everything will be settled between us. You are your own mistress now and are responsible to no one. I can only pray that you may never regret the course you have thought fit to take."

The following morning Aenne went away unrecconciled to the old lady. The tears ran down the daughter's white face, but the mother's eyes remained dry—she would never let her unruly child see that her heart was almost breaking. The doctor had driven away before daybreak; leave-taking was always painful for him and, in this case, impossible.

The carriage rolled past the castle gardens. Aenne looked up at the bow window involuntarily, although there was nothing to be seen there but the drawn curtains. The light would no longer shine there in the evenings. The day before, immediately after the funeral, the captain of the Castle von Breitenfels had gone to the duke to ask for his release.

"What will he do?" asked Aunt Emilie, turning to Aenne.

"I have no idea, auntie."

"But all professions are so overcrowded, and he has grown unaccustomed to work."

Aenne's shining eyes met hers suddenly and her lips parted in a proud smile,—

"Heinz Kerkow? I have no fears for him, Aunt Emilie," she answered.

"What did you say?" stammered the old lady.

But Aenne remained silent and gazed earnestly

into the distance where rose the towers of the town from which the train was to bear her back to her work and to an uncertain future.

Did this future hold something of happiness for her? She hoped so, she hoped so!

CHAPTER XXX.

IN a fourth-floor room on the Christian-strasse in Dresden, Aunt Emilie was sitting waiting for Aenne to return from the conservatory. The old lady was more impatient than usual, for the postman had left a package for Aenne and also a letter from Dr. Lehmann who corresponded with Aenne regularly.

Four years had passed since Mrs. May had virtually forced her only daughter to go her own way and, in truth, this way had not been an easy one. The stiff-necked old woman in the distant mountain town did not guess how her child grieved and longed for her, and how she suffered under the ever-repeated refusal of Aenne's offers to go to her. Only once in all this time had Aenne gone to Breitenfels and then because a severe attack of influenza had laid her mother upon a sick-bed, and Aenne had vied with the doctor in caring for her and watching over her, and had striven to regain her good will by every means in her power; but when the old lady was again able to sit in her arm-chair by the window, Aenne could see that she was not forgiven and she returned to Dresden once more to forget her heart-ache in work.

She had arranged that the doctor should keep her posted every week as to her mother's condition, and

that he was glad to write her was made evident by his earnest, respectful letters, which showed between every line that he would not forget her. He had not married, but Aenne hoped that her fair-haired little cousin, who held a daughter's place toward her mother and who worshipped him secretly with all the ardor of a first love, would one day become his wife.

"I cannot say anything about it to him," Aenne had said to her aunt. "I have learned what comes of interfering. Let him alone; he will come to it himself."

"He is still waiting for you, poor fellow," the old lady would answer.

Aenne had learned to the full what waiting meant, waiting in torture and uncertainty without a word or sign from the one for whom she waited. She herself had so willed it; she had sent him from her, she had had the strength to use a cruel remedy in order that his sick mind might be restored to health.

"I cannot bind myself to you, Heinz, I am weak and I need a strong arm to lean upon. I should only be a burden upon you now. But if you will come back to me some day when you have made a place for yourself in the world, whatever that place may be, I will follow you. Until then, you must leave me."

And without a word in reply, he had turned away. She could not understand to this day how she could have spoken with such clear, cold decision. She knew that it was a desperate chance—all or

nothing—a last attempt to shake the man from his apathy. Would it succeed? Who could tell? It was well for her that she was overwhelmed with work, for in every idle moment his image would rise before her as he had stood by the bedside of his dead son, his arms stretched out to her,—

“If you force me to live, you must stay with me, Aenne.”

It was then that she had spoken. She knew only that he had given up his position and had gone out into the world. Where? No news had come from him, but hope lived deep in her heart. And, strange, the longer the time went by, the less frequent grew the hours of doubt and the more confidently did she await his coming.

She had again refused a brilliant offer to appear in opera, in the certain conviction that Heinz would not like to see her on the stage. No one could understand her, nor did she take the trouble to explain her reasons. She gave lessons, sang in church and concert, always captivating her hearers anew with her beautiful voice and lovely presence. She lived quietly with her aunt, never saw callers and put aside all her earnings.

Aunt Emilie herself knew nothing of the girl's inner life. She believed that Aenne lived for her art alone and had long since forgotten her unhappy love-affair with Heinz von Kerkow. She did not believe that the girl would ever marry. Why should she? They were so comfortable here; Aenne seemed so contented in her profession and the little establishment was kept in such spotless order that, for her

own part, Aunt Emilie was quite willing to have things continue as they were. To-day, however, she was uneasy because the doctor's letter bore a Berlin postmark—what could have taken him to the capital? The old lady paid no heed to the package—doubtless it was another autograph album from some school-girl admirer.

At last the hall door opened and the next moment Aenne entered, a little tired and worn, but with the old sweet smile on her lips.

“Good-evening, auntie! How short the days are getting and it's only the end of September!” she said. “Is there any news from Breitenfels?” she added, putting down a roll of music.

“There is a letter from the doctor, child—from Berlin—what in the world can he be doing there?”

Aenne opened her eyes in surprise, but seated herself comfortably in the arm-chair by the window where the old lady's flowers nodded in the fresh autumn breeze and took the cup of tea her aunt offered her.

“Ah,” she said, stroking the wrinkled hand, “this is the pleasantest hour of the day, and I don't need to go out again this evening, Auntie, the concert rehearsal isn't to take place; so I can be lazy to my heart's content. But let me see the doctor's letter—from Berlin, indeed—and the package? What can it be, I wonder—an autograph album in which I am to immortalize myself, I suppose. By the way, auntie, Miss Hochleitner has been married in New York—so an old pupil of hers told me. But what

can the doctor have to say?" She opened the letter and began to read it to herself:—

"MY DEAR FRIEND;—What is he doing in Berlin? you will exclaim when you see the postmark of the capital. You would never guess! I have not been banished from Breitenfels, neither am I on my wedding journey! I might tell you that the kaiser has appointed me his physician-in-ordinary, or that I have been engaged as travelling companion by a millionaire uncle. But I will out with the truth at once! My report upon your mother's condition was due day before yesterday, but I was so busy with preparations for my trip, and your mother took such an extraordinary interest in my movements that I really had no time to write you. And now for the gist of the matter. Your mother is well and I should not be at all surprised if she were to descend upon you in the flesh some day, without warning! You will laugh when I tell you why. Your mother positively refuses to believe that Berlin is my destination. She thinks—her whole manner shows it—that I am going to Dresden to join my bride—meaning you! This is an idea fixed with her and nothing can disabuse her of it.

"Yes, Miss Aenne, it is absurd, but in laughing at it, I can't help pulling a face as a child does to keep from crying. At all events, we both know that she unfortunately is mistaken—but she is not to be convinced of it. She has made me describe minutely the best way of getting to Dresden, and I am sure that the hasty summoning of her dressmaker is

closely connected with her mistaken belief. So you may be prepared.

"This time I am wholly innocent; I have come to Berlin to make a study of a new and most interesting method of treating diphtheria and to pay a visit to a new sanitarium established at Charlottenburg by a friend of mine. I mean to model an establishment of my own upon it, in Breitenfels. I have abandoned my idea of founding a sanitarium for children and have devoted my attention to founding a hospital for nervous affections.

"As soon as this plan is an accomplished fact, I mean to bring home my wife. I will confide this to you—she is a sensible, good little girl, your cousin, and, strange as it may seem, she is very fond of me. We do not intend to have a long engagement, not wishing to irritate your mother and to avoid the scandal that would be created by an engaged couple living under the same roof. At Easter the bomb-shell may fall, that is, the engagement announcements will be issued, the banns published, and three weeks later the wedding! Do not be angry, Aenne, but I shall not invite you.

"And now I have made my confession, my dear friend, and so good-bye. My way takes me near Dresden, but—I have little time to spare and—well, you know the other reason—my heart still aches a little when I am with you.

"Good-bye! I wish that I might hear some day that you are happy—you know what I mean.

"Ever your devoted,

"LEHMANN."

While Aenne was reading her letter, Aunt Emilie had donned hat and coat, armed herself with a basket and was only waiting for some information as to the contents of the letter before setting out to do her marketing for the following day.

Aenne looked up pleasantly.

"Mother is well," she said, "and the doctor has gone to Berlin for a few days to investigate a new cure for diphtheria."

"Isn't he coming here?" asked Aunt Emilie.

"No, auntie, he has no time. Are you going now? I should like to go with you but I am a little tired."

"*Auf Wiedersehen*, then," nodded the old lady. With that she trotted off and Aenne was left alone. She still held the doctor's letter in her hand, but her head rested against the cushions of the old-fashioned arm-chair and her gaze wandered over roofs and tree-tops to the hills which were growing fainter in the mists of evening. She sighed and shook her head; for the past few days she had been tortured by sudden doubt and vague forebodings. If Heinz had not yet succeeded he would never succeed—she ought not to have let him face the future without hope!

Usually when these painful thoughts assailed her, she would put them to flight with unflinching courage, but, to-day, she could not repulse them. No sign from him in four long years! But careers do not lie ready for the taking, especially for a man who must first master the necessary rudiments of even the most ordinary calling.

No, no! And then she began to wonder over and over again, upon what coast the storm of fate had stranded him. Ah, perhaps he had gone down, perhaps his feeble strength had not sufficed the fragile craft! And then she smiled—Heinz Kerkow? A man who had only to will to succeed and who had only to learn again how to will, would never go down, in spite of anything and everything! And if nothing else sustained him, his defiant spirit would keep him above the waters. She knew that he would show himself neither a weakling nor a coward. And while she was thus thinking, with cheeks flushed with inward emotion, her fingers had unfastened the strings of the little package, removed the gray paper and taken out a book from the white wrappings. Across the plain brown linen cover was the title in gold letters: "A Struggle for Happiness."

She examined the book more closely, opened it and read the title page: "A Struggle for Happiness. True Scenes from the Life of a Castaway. Tenth Thousand."

Who could have sent her this book with so strange a title? She turned another page and suddenly her heart stood still with a great and joyful fear.

Verses! The familiar, forceful handwriting which she knew so well! She started up in uncontrollable excitement and then sank back into her chair and tried to read. But her hands trembled so that she could not hold the book, and she laid it upon the window-sill and, bending low over the pages, read on and on with tear-dimmed eyes.

All at once Aenne laid her head down upon the little volume and wept, wept with joy as she had not done for a long, long time. Then, with the book clasped tightly to her, she sat silently in the twilight, letting the darkness hide her flushed cheeks. That hour outweighed all the long, weary years of waiting. She no longer wondered what he had made of himself. She did not ask: When will he come? She was as one in a trance.

Aunt Emilie found her still sitting in the dark.

"Why, what does this mean?" she asked.

The lamp was brought in and disclosed a glowing face and sparkling eyes. Only once before had the old lady seen her niece look like this—when she had gone to the ball at the castle shortly before her reckless engagement to Günther.

"Child!" exclaimed the aunt, "has anything happened?"

Aenne shook her head.

"Nothing, auntie. I have been reading and want to finish my book."

She seated herself at the table and went on with her reading, and when Aunt Emilie summoned her to supper, for the first time in her life Aenne was impatient with her and the old lady retired to her own room, deeply hurt.

And the girl read on and on. The book was a description of Heinz Kerkow's own life, from which Aenne learned with a throbbing pulse that he, like her, had sought to find his lost happiness in art. And he had laid in Breitenfels, years before, the foundation of his present success. How unjust, how

bitterly unjust she had been to him when she had said to him that he must return to her a man of action. He had already been a man of action before that mental paralysis had fallen upon him. But she soon dried her tears, for what followed was a description of untiring and successful effort.

Since he had been sure of the love that meant his happiness, he had worked with joy and delight, and he had succeeded in securing an assured and honorable position in a famous publishing house. And now he was coming to ask her if she were ready to follow him.

It was scarcely light the next morning when Aenne entered her aunt's bedroom and stood over her with white face and shining eyes.

"You must get up early this morning, auntie," she said, "my bridegroom is coming to-day."

The good old soul started up in alarm for she thought Aenne's mind must be wandering.

"You poor child, I knew yesterday, from your looks, that there was something the matter with you!" she cried.

Then Aenne told her the story of the little package, and Aunt Emilie had perforce to believe and plied her niece with questions. But Aenne scarcely answered.

"Do not question me, I cannot talk I am so happy!" her eyes pleaded.

"Do you know when he is coming?" the old lady inquired.

"No," was the quiet response.

Then Aunt Emilie grew indignant.

“And so it’s all uncertain! Suppose he shouldn’t come at all!”

“He will come,” she answered; but Aunt Emilie only shook her head as she dressed and prepared to go out to market to make a few additional purchases for the midday meal.

But when she returned and entered the sitting-room with a bunch of chrysanthemums in her hand, she let her flowers fall in joyful amazement. In the middle of the room stood a tall, soldierly-looking man holding Aenne in his arms, while her head rested upon his breast.

He had come.

THE END.

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